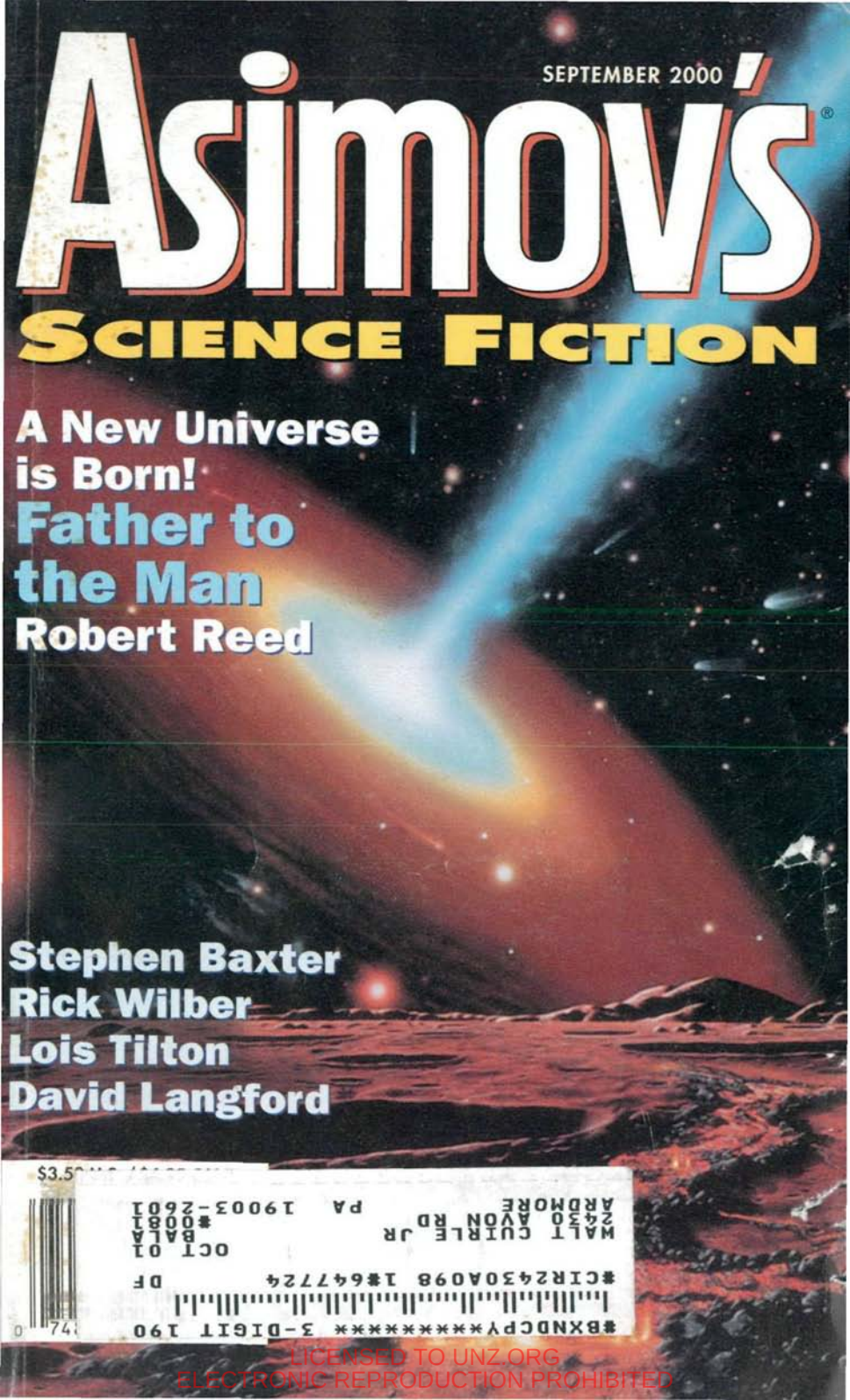

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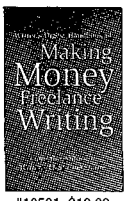

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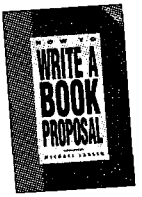

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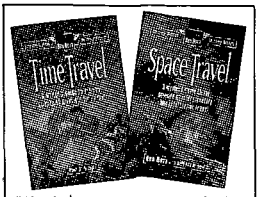

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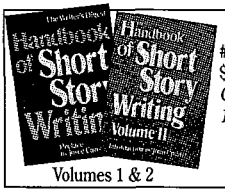

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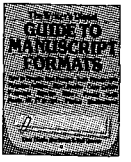

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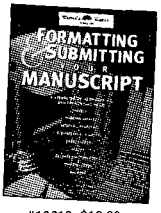

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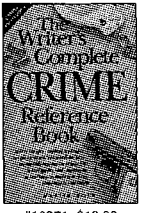

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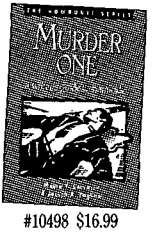

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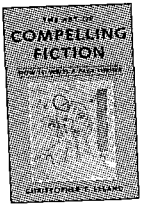

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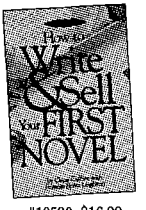

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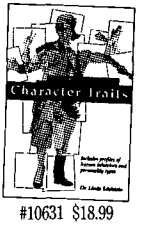

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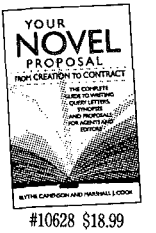

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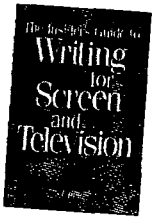

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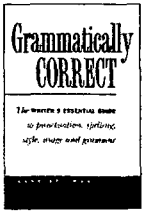

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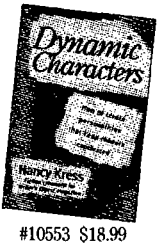

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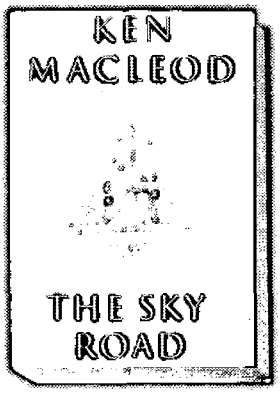

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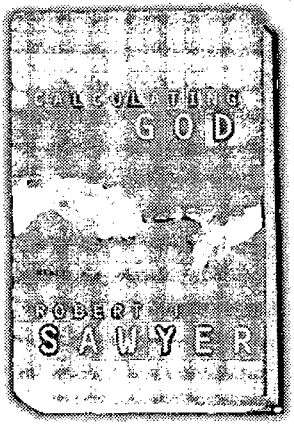

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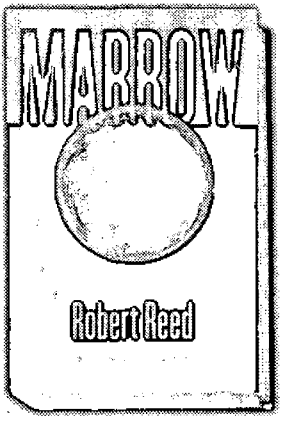

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

PLEISTOCENE PARK

The woolly mammoth may soon be back among us, after an absence of ten or fifteen thousand years. I'm glad to hear it, and I hope you are too. Not everybody is.

What I'm talking about is the current scheme by an international passel of scientists to recreate *Mammuthus primigenius*, the shaggy European mammoth of the Pleistocene, by inserting DNA from the remains of a Pleistocene mammoth into ova of the Asian elephant, the mammoth's closest living relative, that have been stripped of modern elephant genes. The hope is that a mammoth fetus would result, which a female elephant would carry to term and deliver. Would the elephant foster-mother realize that something fishy had taken place? Dr. Larry D. Agenbroad of Northern Arizona University, a geologist who is part of the project, doesn't think so. He doubts that she would be very seriously bothered, "though she might wonder why her baby is so hairy."

Before you can make a rabbit stew, though, you need to catch your rabbit. The first step in this operation is to find some mammoth DNA. But a promising source for that is at hand: the twenty-thousand-year-old Jarkov mammoth (named for the family that first spotted it in the Arctic tundra of Siberia) that was discovered not long ago in an almost perfect state of preservation, thanks to the deep-freeze conditions of northern Siberia, where winter temperatures approaching -100 degrees Fahrenheit are the norm.

There's nothing new about finding mammoth remains in Siberia. Chinese merchants were doing a brisk trade in Siberian ivory more than two thousand years ago; aware that the Siberians dug it out of the ground, they believed that it came from a kind of gigantic mole or rat that tunneled through the icy soil using two huge teeth. A seventeenth-century Chinese natural-history text speaks of "the *fen-shu*, 'the rat beneath the ice' . . . a kind of rat as big as an elephant which lives underground and dies as soon as it comes into the air." By that time European travelers in the far north had also begun hearing tales of this giant "rat," which the natives called *mamantu* or *mammut*, a name that supposedly meant "that-which-lives-beneath-the-ground."

Eventually it was understood that this colossal "rat" was in fact an extinct elephant of northern climes. Its tusks were in high demand for transformation into combs, vases, and other ornamental objects: some fifty thousand pounds a year of mammoth ivory passed through the market at the Siberian town of Yakutsk in the nineteenth century. In August 1799 a Siberian named Ossip Shumakhov, searching for ivory in the delta of the Lena River on the shores of the Arctic Ocean, spotted something dark and large inside a huge block of ice; it turned out to be the frozen carcass of a mammoth, complete with skin and hair. Shumakhov was too frightened of the carcass to excavate it, and over the next few years it was exposed by gradual thawing, which allowed wolves and foxes to gnaw away much of its flesh; but a lot of the ancient beast, including one eye and much of its brain, still remained by the time the Russian scientist Mikhail Ivanovich Adams collected

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it and hauled it off to St. Petersburg, where it is on exhibit to this day.

Another frozen mammoth turned up along the Beresovka River of Siberia in 1900—nearly complete except for its trunk and part of one foreleg, which had been nibbled by wild animals after being laid bare by a summer thaw. (The Beresovka mammoth, stuffed, is also on display in St. Petersburg today.) Another was found on the Taiymyr Peninsula of Siberia in 1948, and in the same year the partial corpse of a frozen baby mammoth was unearthed near Fairbanks, Alaska: I remember seeing it on display in the main lobby of the American Museum of Natural History the following year, lying in a glass-topped freezer chest. Other similar finds have followed with great regularity.

The Jarkov mammoth, discovered in 1997, is the first to be found in the era of modern genetic wizardry. The intact carcass, that of a male, is eleven feet tall and weighs some seven tons. Radiocarbon dating shows it to be about twenty thousand years old. After prolonged study *in situ,* the specimen finally was carved out of the ground in October 1999. Encased in a twenty-three-ton block of permafrost, it was taken by helicopter to the town of Khatanga, 150 miles away, where scientists working at temperatures of 11 degrees Fahrenheit in a laboratory inside a cavern of ice have spent months carefully thawing it out with hair dryers. The plan now is to extract DNA from the soft tissues that can be used for cloning a living mammoth. (The possibility also has been raised that sperm cells could be taken from the body for artificial insemination.)

Will it work? The scientists involved in the project are hopeful, although others have their doubts. One of the latter group, Dr. Hessel Bouma 3rd of Calvin College in Michigan, noted that the cloning "would start with DNA not from a fresh cell, but from one haphazardly frozen by nature. The chances of DNA being intact are very, very small." Others point out that mammoths and elephants, though closely related, belong to different species: mammoths have fifty-eight chromosomes, elephants fifty-six. Cross-species cloning has never been attempted even with living creatures, let alone with an extinct one. Cross-species insemination (assuming sperm is available and is still potent after twenty thousand years) is likewise an iffy proposition.

The cloning group thinks it's worth a try, anyway. "Why not?" asks Dr. Agenbroad, the Arizona geologist. "I'd rather have a cloned mammoth than another sheep"—a reference to Dolly, the cloned sheep produced in Scotland a few years ago.

But objections are already coming in from the scientific ethicists—the people whose job it is to say, as clergymen once did in the old monster movies, that There Are Some Things That Man Was Not Meant To Do.

Some of them think that the cloning is a bad idea, apparently because any sort of cloning makes them uncomfortable. One argument is that any cloned mammoth would be only 99.5 percent pure, with the remainder of its genes modern-elephant ones coming from its mother. Why this should matter is not clear to me. If it looks 99.5 percent mammothlike, down to the thick reddish fur, the massive hump on its head, and the great curving tusks, then I think we could regard it as a convincing simulacrum, the closest to the real thing we are ever likely to see, even if it might not seem completely kosher to an authentic Pleistocene beast. And I can find no harm in bringing such a majestic creature back to life, even in slightly impure form. We are already responsible for the extinction of the dodo, the giant auk, the passenger pigeon, the aurochs, the quagga, and untold numbers of other strange and wonderful

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species. Quite possibly the mammoth too was one of mankind's victims, ten thousand years ago; no one knows how or why it became extinct, but excessive hunting is one plausible conjecture. If we, steeped as we are in the blood of so many fellow creatures, manage now to put our splendid intelligence to work restoring one of the vanished ones to the face of the earth, why should the response be anything other than tumultuous applause?

Another objection is that the excavation of the Jarkov mammoth was funded by television's Discovery Channel and the French magazine *Paris Match*; this entertainment-industry connection somehow seems to taint the project in the eyes of the ethicists. (Science isn't meant to be entertaining, I guess.)

Leave it to San Francisco, that hotbed of anti-scientific passions where I happen to live, to lead the charge in the wrong direction. Just a few weeks ago my local paper, the San Francisco *Chronicle,* worked itself up to righteous anti-cloning fervor in an editorial boldly headed, DON'T MESS WITH WOOLLY MAMMOTHS. The editorialist allows that the Jarkov specimen itself may well provide useful insights into mammoth biology, but then turns to "all the giddy talk about trying to clone the mammoth" and asks, "Do we really want to bring a woolly mammoth back to life—or, heaven forbid, try to raise a whole herd?"

Heaven forbid!

Why, the world is such a nasty place already, the *Chronicle* tells us, that "certainly the woollies will get the worst of the deal in returning to a planet now overrun with six billion people." Would there be no room for free-ranging mammoths even on the Godforsaken tundra of remotest Siberia? Apparently not. "It would only be a matter of time until they ended up in zoos," says the newspaper, if the cloning should somehow be successful; and zoos, of course,

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are little more than concentration camps for our fellow creatures. Better that they should languish forever in extinction than be compelled to endure the horrendous torments of the San Diego Wild Animal Park!

And finally—what better closing flourish is there for a good editorial than a rousing *reductio ad absurdum?*—the editorial wonders whether "woolly burgers would become all the rage." That *is* a nice twenty-first century touch, worthy of a Phil Dick dystopia—some ghastly heartless corporation turning out cloned mammoths by the millions so that they can be turned into Bigger Macs. Never mind the economics of the issue, of course, or the fact that we don't currently eat elephant burgers, though the big beasts could easily be farmed for the purpose.

The *Chronicle* concludes by saying, "Chances are, there is a very good reason they are extinct." I decode the subtext here to mean that it was God's will that *Mammuthus primigenius* disappear from the face of the earth, and what God has extincted, let no laboratory dare to summon back into being.

Sure. Here political correctness turns itself into a Möbius strip. There are those who think San Francisco is full of wicked atheists, and others who think San Francisco is a hotbed of environmentalist fanatics who would launch a demonstration in favor of keeping any creature, even the smallpox virus, from becoming extinct; and out of San Francisco comes a cry for the continued extinction of the woolly mammoth, because God wants it that way! One would think they were talking about turning cloned velociraptors loose in our midst. One wants to weep. But one prefers to look hopefully toward that ice cave in Siberia instead, with fingers crossed that the new century will bring us the first little woolly mammoths to walk the earth in ten thousand years. O

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Back Row: Gardner Dozois and Sheila Williams.
Front Row: Michael Swanwick, Susan Ann Protter, and Geoffrey A. Landis

It's time to tell you the winners of *Asimov's Science Fiction's* Annual Readers' Award Poll, which is now in its thirteenth year. As always, these were your choices, the stories and artwork and poetry that you—the readers—liked best out of all the stuff we published in 1999. The readers were the only judges for this particular award—no juries, no experts—and, as always, it's intriguing to compare results with the Hugo and Nebula ballots, as well as with the readers' polls conducted by *Locus* and *SF Chronicle*. This year's winners, and runners-up, were:

NOVELLA

1. **HUNTING THE SNARK, MIKE RESNICK**
2. The Executioner's Guild, Andy Duncan
3. Forty, Counting Down, Harry Turtledove
4. Argonautica, Walter Jon Williams
5. The Winds of Marble Arch, Connie Willis
6. The Wedding Album, David Marusek
7. Son Observe the Time, Kage Baker
8. The Exile of the Evening Star, Allen Steele
9. Dapple, Eleanor Arnason
10. Baby's Fire, Robert Reed

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NOVELETTE

1. **THE CHOP GIRL, IAN R. MACLEOD**
2. A Knight of Ghosts and Shadows, Gardner Dozois
3. Diana by Starlight, R. Garcia y Robertson
4. 10^{16} to 1, James Patrick Kelly
5. Dragon's Teeth, Lois Tilton (tie)
5. The Alien, Richard Shelley (tie)
6. A Martian Romance, Kim Stanley Robinson
7. Stellar Harvest, Eleanor Arnason
8. Cabbages and Kales, or, How We Downsized North America, David Marusek
9. The Window, Judith Berman
10. Angels of Ashes, Alastair Reynolds

SHORT STORY

1. **ANCIENT ENGINES, MICHAEL SWANWICK**
2. Evolution Never Sleeps, Elisabeth Malartre
3. Arthur Sternbach Brings the Curveball to Mars, Kim Stanley Robinson
4. Scherzo with Tyrannosaur, Michael Swanwick
5. Hothouse Flowers, Mike Resnick
6. Yurek Rutz, Yurek Rutz, Yurek Rutz, David Marusek
7. Riding the Giganotosaur, Michael Swanwick
8. Into the Blue Abyss, Geoffrey A. Landis
9. Dirty Little Cowards, William Sanders
10. Human Bay, Robert Reed

BEST POEM

1. **CHRISTMAS (AFTER WE ALL GET TIME MACHINES), GEOFFREY A. LANDIS**
2. Beware the Werecanary!, Bruce Boston
3. When an Alien Is Inhabiting Your Body, Laurel Winter
4. Curse of the Fantasy Writer's Wife, Bruce Boston
5. Atlantis, Judith Moffett
6. Butterside Down, William John Watkins (tie)
6. Down in Your Bones Only You Alone Know, Bruce Boston (tie)
7. Mathematical Limericks, Bruce Boston (tie)
7. Another Short Story, Bruce Boston (tie)
8. Curse of the Incubus' Wife, Bruce Boston (tie)
9. Eisenberg Haiku, Timons Esaias
10. Dog Star, Joe Haldeman

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BEST COVER ARTIST

1. **JIM BURNS**
2. Kim Poor
3. Robert Walters
4. Kelly Freas
5. Nicholas Jainschigg
6. Michael Carroll
7. Mark Garlick
8. Don Dixon
9. John Foster

BEST INTERIOR ARTIST

1. **DARRYL ELLIOT**
2. David Michael Beck
3. Laurie Harden
4. Alan Giana
5. Kelly Freas
6. Shirley Chan Levi
7. Mark Evans
8. Steve Cavallo
9. Wolf A. Read
10. George Krauter

As promised, all ballots were automatically entered in a drawing for a free one-year subscription to *Asimov's*. The winner of this year's drawing was Mark Siegal of Ithaca, New York.

Both our Readers' Awards and *Analog's* Analytical Laboratory Awards were presented on May 21, 2000, during a dim sum brunch at the Pacifica Restaurant in New York City's Chinatown the morning after SFWA's Nebula Banquet function. Each winner received a cash award and a certificate. Of the *Asimov's* winners, Michael Swanwick and Geoffrey A. Landis were on hand to accept their Readers Awards in person. Other notables present included Marianne Porter; Mary Turzillo; James Patrick Kelly; Pam Kelly; Susan Ann Protter, Ian R. MacLeod's agent; James Gunn; G. David Nordley; Gail Wiesner; Jerry Oltion; Kathy Oltion; Adam-Troy Castro; Sheila Williams; Stanley Schmidt; Joyce Schmidt; Charles N. Brown, editor of *Locus*; Beth Gwinn, *Locus* photographer; Trevor Quachri; Leah Marcus; Abigail Browning, our Subsidiary Rights Manager; Christine Begley, our Associate Publisher; Gina Formisano; and *Asimov's*/*Analog* publisher Peter Kanter. ○

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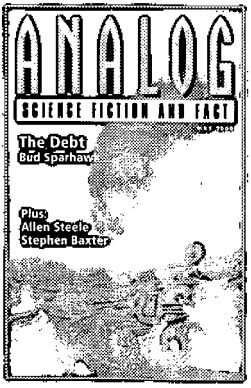

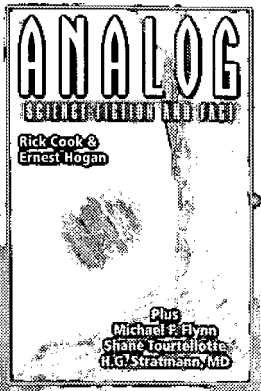

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"Father to the Man" is the concluding chapter of a five story series that began with "Sister Alice" (November 1993), and continued with "Brother Perfect" (September 1995), "Mother Death" (January 1998), and "Baby's Fire" (July 1999). These tales will eventually be combined into a novel.

FATHER TO THE MAN

Robert Reed

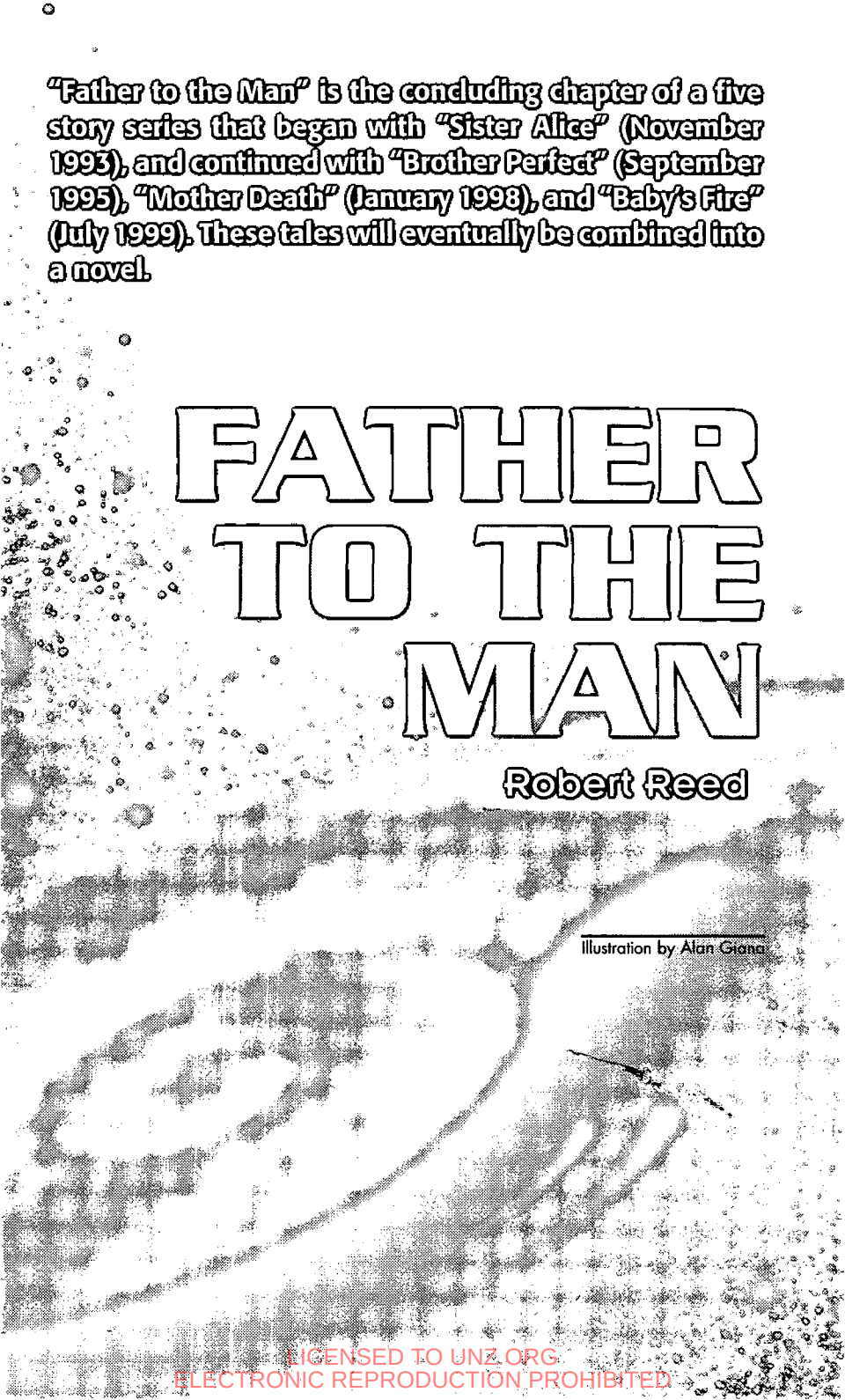

Illustration by Alan Giana

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1

Let me show you what these little eyes have seen. . . .

The Core obliterated, its living worlds and helpless souls butchered, while the rest of the galaxy is forced to defend itself from the onslaught of radiations and angry plasmas and poisonous ash and the enraged, vengeful refugees. . . .

The Earth, our sweet mother, forced to become an elaborate trap. A trap to snare me. But the trap is sprung because of cynics and fools, and another hundred billion lives cease for nothing that can be confused for a purpose. . . .

The Ten Million Year Peace—the central achievement of every Family—debased and diluted, mocked and denied. And with its collapse, half of the Families are forced to surrender their good wealth and their great names. . . .

You, my sister . . . the honored and revered Alice Chamberlain . . . you are transmuted into the galaxy's most famous criminal, despised by every citizen who manages to survive the terrors that you help unleash. . . .

The children of my youth will be turned into monsters and set against me. . . .

Then against all odds, one of those monsters will redeem himself in my eyes. . . .

And with your fantastic talents behind my fingertips, I will race through the Milky Way, and beyond . . . and I will find my way back through time and hellish space, cheating preposterous odds . . . earning myself this little moment, this remarkable chance, to look squarely into your most human eyes, and ask you this:

"Who is the adult here, Alice?

"And between us, if you're honest about our circumstances . . . between us, who now is the innocent child. . . ?"

—Ord, in conversation

The fierce blast uncapped the wormhole, wrenching open a fragile and temporary passageway into the past. Ord plunged into his target, nothing left of him now but some picked talents and a tough exoskeleton, and his little self, and a decidedly simple faith that everything would happen as planned. As promised. Glancing sideways, he noticed that someone, by means unknown, had painted the walls of the wormhole, adorning them with the faces of its builders. Old-style human faces. Family faces, famous and notorious, all smiling with the same muscular confidence. He spent only nanoseconds in that narrow tunnel fashioned from strange matter and relentless genius. But he noticed what could have been his own face—a male Chamberlain with shaggy red hair and blue-white eyes and constellations of rusty little freckles. Then the face was behind him, and he emerged from the wormhole, crushing his first instincts and turning his eyes again, not looking ahead but squinting hard to look behind himself, watching for whoever would follow him from the hole.

A figure appeared. Tiny like him, or tinier.

Then it seemed as if there was a second figure. A little smear of nothing on the heels of the first one.

But before Ord could be sure, he plunged into a blanket of smart dust. A trillion impacts bled away his momentum. A cocoon of plasmas blinded him. Then a brilliant light found him, blinding him again. Having served its single purpose, the wormhole had grown unstable. Shattering at a point of in-

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tentional weakness, it spewed most of its energies into the future. But what remained was angry enough to make him tumble, and burn, peeling away much of his remaining armor, and wringing from him a long sharp scream.

Eventually, he drifted free of the dust, finding himself immersed in a chilly vacuum, surrounded by suns upon suns upon suns. Old red monsters, the big ones were. And there were blue stragglers created when old suns merged. Plus there were countless yellow and orange suns here, suns born from the metal-rich clouds, in natural congregations or otherwise. Worlds circled those suns. Colony worlds for human species, and others. Plus there were the millions of worlds wandering between the suns, yanked away from their old solar systems by near-collisions. Many had their own heat and light. Terraformers had been at work here. A remarkable place, this. The core of the Milky Way. A density of energy and light, and life, unparalleled in human experience. So peaceful. So lovely. Perfect, and innocent. And doomed.

With every sort of voice, Ord cried out, "Can you see me? Hello! I'm here to warn you! Chamberlains! Sanchexes! All of you. . . ! You have to stop your work, *now!* Instantly! Because if you *don't,* everything's going to turn to shit and death—!"

A voice ambushed Ord.

Quietly, from somewhere close, the voice suggested, "Look over your shoulder."

Too late, he glanced back along his course. The dust was absorbing the fantastic energies, reradiating them as simple heat, and X-rays, and a shower of gamma radiation. And out of that brilliance came a figure. Closing on him, the figure whispered, "My good dear friend, Ord."

It was a Nuyen's voice.

But there wasn't any response when he opened a private channel, whispering, "Is it you, Xo?"

A childhood friend, of sorts. Xo had been a partner and ally during the last few centuries. He was a renegade Nuyen, a traitor to his scheming family . . . and for that instant, Ord couldn't help but smile, relieved that his friend had managed to follow him to this remarkable place, bringing his voice and talents to this exceptionally critical business. . . .

Again, he said, "Xo?"

The impact was sudden, and jarring.

Too late, he realized his mistake. This was his second pursuer—that little smear that might have been anything. This was Ravleen, the Sanchex who despised him beyond words, beyond reason. She must have saved herself by making herself very tiny and swift, diving into the wormhole in the last nanosecond. Tiny as she was, she had managed to knife her way through the dust, retaining most of her velocity. Without a thought for her own safety, she struck him like a cannon ball, their momentum married, and with every little weapon at her disposal, she tried to murder him.

Kicks and bites were about the extent of her abuse.

And insults shouted loud enough to deafen.

Ravleen shouted, "You're a stupid ugly tool of a turd! And I'm going to kill you now. Finally!"

She had chased him halfway across the galaxy, for tens of thousands of years, but there was too little left of her now to do more than bruise and distract.

Ord weathered the beating without comment.

Then another voice intruded, asking, "What do you mean?" with an inky smoothness. "Who is it that you want to kill, Ravleen?"

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Xo. Finally.

Using a voice that was oddly soothing, the young Nuyen said, "*You're* the tool. *You're* the stupid one. And you're exceptionally ugly, I think."

Ravleen felt the words, and paused.

She seemed to be examining her battered self. The collision had left her grievously injured. Her most fragile, intricate organs were exposed to the elements now. Baking in the radiation, they were dying. *She* was dying. A look of supreme fatigue came over her. Ord saw it in her posture, heard it in the depths of her silence. And because it was the proper thing to do, he deftly positioned his own body between her and the wormhole, using himself to absorb the worst of the poisons.

Xo drifted closer, whispering, "You aren't the same horrible creature that you were. Are you, Ravleen?"

She said nothing.

"I can tell," he promised. "To follow us, you surrendered your weapons. Didn't you? But then you were still too massive, so you had to abandon pieces of your mind. Pieces with all the powerful emotions inside." Then with a grave wonder, he added, "To catch up with us, you had to give up your hatred. Isn't that what you did. . . ?"

"I kept enough of it," she sputtered. "You prick!"

But Xo simply laughed, and with a sudden fondness, he said, "Even so, Ravleen. Even so. Believe me, I know . . . this is how you find the road to redemption. . . ."

2

You will flee the Core and return to our ancestral home, to the Chamberlain mansion. Then in your stubborn-proud fashion, you will apologize for your role in building the baby universe. To me, then to everyone else . . . you will admit that your tiny universe is leaking into our old one. The inevitable blaze will destroy the Core, and billions of lives, and everything will be transformed by the endless catastrophe. For your crimes, you will be sentenced to an eternity inside a tiny, tiny prison cell. You will be stripped naked of your great talents, and your little ones. And with one exception, you will endure that minuscule existence without complaint or the smallest rebellion.

But you will escape once. Just long enough to coax me into finding our older brother, Thomas.

Thomas will steal the best of your talents, then give them to me. Suddenly, I will be powerful and swift, and vast. And with your blessing, he will give me a mission. I will be a boy filled with energies and knowledge that I cannot fathom, much less master . . . and I'll stand alone between chaos and the Great Peace.

Insane as it must sound. . . .

And then I will return to the Earth. As you knew I would. I will visit you inside your tiny prison cell to ask a simple question:

"What haven't you told me, Alice?"

Quite a lot, I will learn.

In a dense whisper, you will feed me information that you had kept secret from your captors. You'll tell me about the wormhole and how I can return to the past. With that incessant pride of yours, you'll describe again that awful baby universe of yours. What you built at such enormous cost. With the help

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of other Chamberlains and the Sanchexes, and representatives from another five hundred Families, too. Yes, you'll give everyone their due. You've always been fair. Then you'll admit the unthinkable to me. Even though the umbilical between our universe and the Baby will turn unstable . . . even though you'll know full well that no force or contrivance or cleverness or simple luck can save the Core . . . you'll still pick one of your own to crawl into the umbilical, slipping down that cramped passageway . . . entering a realm where laws and constraints are still unformed. . . .

Half-born.

A wilderness of infinite potential where one of you can live forever as the God of Gods. . . .

"Who crossed over?" I will ask you.

Spellbound.

And you will say to me, "Closer."

So I will dip my head, and listen, and you will offer me two simple words . . . two incredible words . . . and about that subject, you will never utter a third word . . . even in the most offhand fashion. . . .

—Ord, in conversation

Three of them huddled together in the vacuum, broiling in the fading light of the dead wormhole.

And suddenly, they were four.

Tiny again, with most of his talents ruined or left behind, Ord felt the entity only as a presence. A chill licking at his fringes. A subtle fading of the brighter stars. Then came a mild tug as a great mass moved near, then smoothly pulled away again. Someone was watching. A thousand sensors and eyes and fingertips too delicate to be seen were playing across them. When he guessed that the time was ripe, Ord spoke on a Chamberlain channel. Not in a whisper, but not loudly either. Without a trace of fear and only the most minimal respect, he said, "Hello to you, friend. Hello."

Silence was the reply.

Then an odd urge struck, and Ord asked the darkness, "Do you need our help, friend? Do you?"

In a private whisper, Xo warned, "I smell mistrust. And muscles."

Xo had a few talents left. Which ones, Ord didn't need to know. But on the premise that his friend could still peer into another's mind, he let himself wonder, "Can you guess which Family?"

Xo observed his thoughts, then whispered, "Sanchex."

"Are you sure?"

"A stormy, impulsive mind," Xo added. "And everywhere I look, more muscles."

It was a relief to find something so familiar. Ord had to laugh for a little moment.

Then Ravleen sensed their visitor. "Whoever you are!" she called out. "These assholes are keeping me against my will—!"

A thunderous voice descended on a Sanchex channel.

It asked, "What should I do about them, little one?"

"Kill them," Ravleen barked. "If you *can*."

There was a momentary pause.

Then a face and naked body were conjured from light. They saw a male body, muscular and dark, and in the depths of the eyes, an even greater darkness. The handsome face grinned with a practiced malevolence. Then a

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quieter voice whispered in their ears, warning, "Oh, I could kill them. Easily. And I could butcher *you* as well, little one."

Ravleen fell silent.

"My name is Marvel," the newcomer announced.

The First Sanchex.

But if Ravleen was impressed, she kept the emotion hidden. "If that's who you think you are," she said, kicking and squirming. "Kill us all, if you want. But get me out of these hands, Father. Now! Do you hear me? *Now—!* "

To the limits of their bodies, they were accelerated.

And without warning, separated.

Ord found himself alone in what seemed to be a typical Chamberlain suite. There was a spacious bed, and a bath. There was a universal wall that refused to work. And there was an oxygen atmosphere, meant for him, probably. Which was why he knitted together a young meat-and-blood Chamberlain body, showing that to the prying eyes instead of a tangle of battered machinery and borrowed talents.

Nothing here reminded him of a prison cell. Yet Ord sensed that he couldn't leave, and shouldn't try. That he should play the patient role while the Great Ones were summoned, giving them time to discuss the possibilities and arrive at something that could be confused for a consensus. And only then would they want to speak with him.

Quietly, Ord said, "Alice.

He said, "I'm your baby brother."

He told the walls, "I know what you're doing here, Alice. And I know it all ends, if you don't stop now."

An indifferent silence.

But he wouldn't let himself feel surprise. Ord refused to worry about prosaic issues like time wasted and the unfathomable stakes involved. What he reminded himself, again and always, was that he had come here using a wormhole built for just this contingency. If disaster struck, someone would crawl back from the rubble to report. To dissuade, and defuse. The Great Ones were almost as old as their own species. They wielded talents and achievements beyond number, and a well-deserved arrogance. But arrogance didn't make them fools. No matter how mammoth their powers, and how sweeping their gaze, reason and right still ruled their enormous souls.

"So then, why am I terrified?" he wondered to himself.

Again, he started to call out, "Alice—"

A doorway appeared in what had been a wall of living coral. Beyond lay nothing but a deep grayness, and from the grayness came a sudden heat that dissolved into a comfortable cool wind that combed Ord's shaggy hair. With old-style nostrils, he smelled perspiration. He smelled aromas that could only remind him of himself. Genetic markers that meant *Chamberlain*. He sniffed a second time, and showed his guest a wide smile, and said, "Alice?" with an eagerness that he'd meant to hide.

From the grayness stepped a figure clothed in the same grayness. Thin slippers. Tight trousers. A roomy gray blouse shimmering in the room's light. And a taut black band worn around the forehead. The face beneath looked as young as Ord's, and it smiled in the same overdone fashion. But it wasn't just a clever reflection. Those were not Ord's eyes. The same blue-white color, yes. But beneath their surface was a different quality, a sense of mass implying great age, and within that mass lay a sadness both profound and appealing.

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Ord recognized the sadness.

"Where have I seen you?" he asked himself.

And the creature before him shrugged, took another step, then admitted, "You've seen me many times, I should hope."

Aloud, Ord asked, "What brother are you?"

"None," said the young face. Said the ancient eyes.

"No," Ord growled. Not in surprise, but in anger. Revulsion. He shook his head defiantly, saying, "You can't be. You *aren't.* He died ages ago—"

"Who is dead?" the visitor inquired.

"My father," Ord said to the impossibility.

"The father of the Chamberlains," he muttered to nobody.

"Ian?" he squeaked.

The old eyes pulled shut, and, with a practiced bow, the visitor said, "In the service of the Great Peace, I am. Yes. Ian Chamberlain."

3

You will say to me, "Closer."

So I will dip my head and listen, and you'll offer me two of the simplest, most incredible words . . . you'll tell me that the person who had crawled down that umbilical and into the baby universe was our father. . . .

"Your father," will be your exact words.

And on that subject, you never offer as much as a third word. . . .

—Ord, in conversation

"Ian's dead."

It was true enough to deserve repetition. Three more times, Ord said the words. Then in the most cursory fashion, he repeated the familiar story.

"A human starship was crippled. Ian was the nearest soul who could help. Eighteen hundred passengers and crew were too close to an aging sun, and there wasn't time to spare when Ian arrived. The Great Peace was barely a million years old. Our talents were much more limited then. Even the First Chamberlain could do only so much. What he could do was send the helpless souls out of the gravity well, or he could save himself. Which wasn't any choice. Chamberlains serve humanity. Always. So he clothed the ship in his own armor, and he flung those people to safety, and the sun's iron core collapsed on schedule, and the supernova gave him a hero's death.

"Every Chamberlain is taught that story," Ord explained. "As children, we are told to live as Ian lived. And we have been promised that, if we are exceptionally fortunate, we will die as he died, in the same perfect fashion. . . ."

The visitor's response was a simple bow. Humble, or indifferent.

Ord didn't let him speak. With a firm voice, he admitted, "History could be wrong. Witnesses and sensors could have made mistakes. Perhaps Ian managed to escape the catastrophe, or survive it. Somehow. And later, when he learned about his heroic death, he might have decided to remain invisible. I suppose. Just to let his children have that delicious story to believe in."

A thin smile broke across the Chamberlain face.

Then, with his own firm voice, the apparition said, "Perhaps. Just perhaps, that is what happened." And then he gave a big conspiratorial wink. "As you say, this was long ago. Your father had to expend fantastic energies just to reach those stranded people. His talents were bulky. Inelegant. Even

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crude. More than today, there were limits to motion and magic." The smile grew brighter. Deeply pleased now. "What if Ian broke one law—abandoning functioning pieces of himself—in order to achieve a higher good? What if he threw away all the machines and talents that he didn't absolutely need for the mission? He sent them racing in one direction, and, lighter for it, he managed to reach the disabled ship in time. Then the sun exploded, and yes, he died. What was Ian was definitely killed. But those functioning talents continued following their original trajectory, and, after an age, they managed to gather into a coherent body. A soul in its own right. That newborn entity acquired consciousness, then took control over its motions. And realizing that it was living outside the strictest laws, it decided, quite reasonably, to keep its existence more secret than not."

A pause.

"What do you think of my story, little one?"

Ord shook his head, then let a harsh loud laugh bubble out of him.

The Chamberlain winced, then warned him, "From what I have heard, both of us are entitled to doubts."

"What do you mean?"

For the first time, the man called him "Ord."

Then he said, "Your friends, particularly that creepy little Nuyen boy . . . they paint a vivid, and, frankly, rather incredible portrait of your last few thousand years. . . ."

Ord said nothing.

With a snort and a vigorous shake of the head, the Chamberlain exclaimed, "This is all such a peculiar business."

Silence.

"When we envisioned who would emerge from our wormhole . . . well, let me just warn you . . . none of the Great Ones ever considered the likes of *you*. . . ."

"You aren't imaginative enough," Ord suggested.

The Chamberlain bristled, then muttered, "Perhaps you're right."

And with that, a pale pink hand was offered, and the walls of the false room dissolved into the surrounding grayness. Ord took the hand, and, instantly, there was a violent braking. The grayness itself began to dissolve, revealing a cold infinity in which a billion suns swam with a delicious, unconscious grace. And in the midst of those suns lay a sphere of perfect blackness. Sagittario, surely. A million solar masses of infinitely compressed matter. The authentic center of the Core. Of the Milky Way. A minor quasar in its youth, murdering suns and spewing out X-rays and great jets of plasma; but now, after the combined genius of the Families and assorted alien species, the black hole was silent. Benign, almost. No wild clouds of gas and dust lay within its reach. Nudged by measured tweaks and the occasional near-miss, the local suns now kept themselves at a safe distance. Which was why the Core was habitable. A paradise, even. Here was an abundance of energy and unclaimed worlds, and an army of near-gods, profoundly bored and begging for the next fantastic challenge.

Ord wasn't certain when he began to cry.

It was the Chamberlain who noticed his mood. Who slipped on a freckled face so that he could show Ord an expression of puzzled concern. "What's wrong, little son? Everything is fine. Is lovely. What possible reason is there to be sad?"

Ord said nothing.

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How could he admit the truth? Their galaxy remained in grave peril, trillions of innocent lives at risk. But what made him sad wasn't their fate, it was his own . . . tiny again, he was . . . and young . . . and very nearly powerless in this incredible realm. . . .

Their destination lay in orbit around Sagittario.

Which, in a simple sense, was true of the entire Milky Way. The Earth and Sol and every other lump of matter were joined together in a great pinwheel that spun, revolving every two hundred million years, around its nothingness.

Alice had described the Great Ones' laboratory. But Ord's first glance found nothing. Considering the enormity of its purpose, the facility was tiny. He had to look twice, squinting. *There*. Sagittario was barely twenty million kilometers across, and their destination was a pluto-sized speck racing at a healthy fraction of light-speed. A piece of scrap, it was. Scrap that began as a single machine that had once helped make the Core safe for protoplasm. And now that machine was sleeping, mending its critical parts, perhaps dreaming of a dangerous future when its powers would be needed again.

Gathered around the platinum-claded body was an atmosphere unlike any other: An invisible but extremely dense accumulation of dark-matter talents and plasmatic talents and baryonic talents made transparent for the sake of visibility, each talent carefully aligned, set together like the intricate pieces of some great puzzle.

They were diving, in effect, into an enormous and perfectly clear ocean. Here were the living bodies of the Great Ones. Ord could taste and smell several thousand distinct entities, each packed as close to its siblings and peers as possible . . . each placing his or her less important talents farther out, and the essentials of their souls as near as possible to what looked like a mountain erected on the machine's northern pole. . . .

Brilliant water-snows capped the mountain. And straddling the peak was a cylindrical white building of no special size or obvious importance. It was the Chamberlain mansion. Not the fat rambling structure that Ord was raised in, but the modest five-story house that the oldest, greatest Chamberlains had known.

Quietly, Ord asked, "Where's Alice?"

"Everywhere," the Chamberlain replied. Then he laughed, shaking his ruddy face, adding with a measured delight, "If I know my daughter, she's everywhere and trying to do everything herself."

"She mentioned you only once," thought Ord.

The Chamberlain heard his thoughts, or guessed them. And with a sturdy *tsk-tsk,* he admitted, "That's probably best. Since I don't exist anymore."

They swooped down on the little building.

But now, in these final moments, Ord found himself looking elsewhere. With every eye, he gazed past the myriad suns, past the great walls of cold dust and hot dust and swirling gases and newborn stars. He knew exactly where the Earth lay inside the great slow pinwheel. Thirty thousand light-years away, and even the sturdy yellow-white light of Sol was invisible to him. But given time, Ord could fashion an army of eyes, and, if he were patient and precise, he would eventually find the light of his home. Thirty thousand years before his birth, that feeble glow had begun its march. Here, in this place and time, Ord was nothingness. Was a possibility, unborn and unimagined. And with that thought, he decided that the entity beside him

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could well *be* Ian Chamberlain. After all, the two of them were much the same: A pair of ghosts trying to climb their way out of oblivion.

He let his father hear his bittersweet thoughts.

And Ian let himself laugh, then patted him on the back with a paternal warmth, telling his youngest, "This is where my talents finally settled. Here. On this ground."

Ord nodded, and waited.

"For a few million years, they worked in secret. They laid the groundwork for creating a new universe. Here." Again, the warm pat of a hand. "Eventually, your sister and the others found me. Found me, and conjured my old personality and flesh from their shared recollections. And when I explained what I was doing here, they decided to help with my glorious work." An appreciative shake of the head. "Indeed, *they* have done most of the work. And all of the most difficult portions. With nothing from me but my sturdy approval."

"Father," Ord whispered.

He asked, "Are you, or aren't you?"

As they set down on the snowy yard, the entity beside him said, "This is what I have learned, Ord. What I am certain of." Again, he gave the boy a warm touch, explaining, "We are nothing but talents, really. Genius and power and focus and skills beyond number. And these faces that we wear? And these bodies of convenience? They are nothing but clothes donned for the narrowest of occasions. . . ."

Ord remained silent.

"Nothing about us is human anymore," he heard. "Except for the skin that we happen to wear. . . !"

To himself, in a locus where Ian couldn't see, Ord thought:

"Maybe you *are* my father."

Then:

"But really, I don't like the man you *are*. . . !"

4

What you will give me, Alice. . . .

Talents impossible to count. Talents legal, and much that is gray. Including vast weapons and drive systems that can double as planet-butchering tools, and an intricate set of plans and contingencies and suggestions, and, I would imagine, buried thoughts and inspirations that wait for the right moment, that will present themselves to me as needed, masquerading as my very own. . . .

If I'd brought every talent with me . . . if circumstances had made it possible . . . there would have been, in effect, two Alices here. You, and me. Mirrored twins of a regal sort. More than a match for every obstacle waiting in our path.

But what I brought to you, in the end . . . well, it's almost nothing. . . .

This is what I can offer. . . .

Plus some of your secret intuitions . . . notions that you hid inside my unconscious self . . . memes with the mass of a few tamed electrons, and the irresistible power of a collapsing sun. . . .

—Ord, in conversation

The cylindrical house looked small from outside, but stepping through any doorway triggered an elaborate set of illusions, cheats, and embedded

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talents. With his second step, the rooms and hallways expanded around Ord, everything but him suddenly enormous; and with his third step, it felt as if he were a fleck lost inside some immeasurable vastness. A new set of tricks, this was. At least for him. And he allowed his surprise to seep out where it could be admired—earning a knowing nod and wink from the man walking next to him, smiling like his finest friend, a strong warm arm thrown casually over Ord's trembling shoulder.

Softly, the boy asked, "How—?"

"Galloping cleverness," Ian replied. "And catastrophic expense." Another wink. Then, "What's a shabby mansion on the outside is a shabby mansion within. But in its center hides our laboratory. Remember, this is delicate work. For good technical reasons, everything, including you and including me, needs to be tiny before we can proceed."

Again, motion.

Fifty meters felt like fifty light-years. Together, they plunged deep into the building, passing into a cylindrical chamber that seemed to be kilometers across, and kilometers tall, and which was lit in the most haphazard fashion by softly glowing orbs that seemed to float where they wanted, in clusters and twos and alone.

"There's also a poetic sense to our smallness," Ian assured him. And assured himself, too, perhaps. "What is any universe if it isn't something born fantastically small, yet bursting with infinities. . . ?"

Ian was a glowing sphere. Round and radiant. Pointedly ethereal. But not Ord. He still wore a boyish body dressed in decidedly ordinary clothes, even though his body had been compressed into a hyperdense fluid no larger than a fat bacillus. He was towed to the chamber's center, and, on slippered feet, he found himself on a platform in front of what looked to be some kind of enormous chambered nautilus. A thousand tentacles were fashioned from every sort of matter. The baryonic, and the dark. While the coiled shell itself was fashioned from strange matter—a silvery, impossibly strong substance forged on the lip of the great black hole.

Ord felt the crackle and spark of energies flowing into the shell. Spiraling deeper and deeper. Conspiring with quantum mechanics, trying to snare one of the baby universes that form effortlessly in the Planck realm.

Ord stared into the machinery.

But the strange matter was perfectly opaque, and his best senses had been left at the door. Which was the same, to one degree or another, for everyone else. Smallness was essential here. As was speed. Slow, blundering talents couldn't be allowed anywhere near such elegant, delicate work.

A voice shook Ord from his reverie.

He heard his name, and turned. A Nuyen was standing beside him. Xo. Then the smear of light next to Xo turned into a Chamberlain. A sister. A sister extruding a confidence and pride that Ord thought he recognized.

"Alice?" he sputtered.

Xo shook his head, whispering, "No."

Warning him, "This one is Adelaide."

The Chamberlain's Fourth. Sister Adelaide was a rather conservative near-god. Never as powerful as Alice, and by nature, not half as bold. But Ord knew who was present. Adelaide was the eldest sister. She was a voice and a presence who would always carry a little more momentum than any other Chamberlain here.

There was another motion, this time on Ord's left.

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Then a harsh, halfway-exhausted voice.

Ravleen was a silhouette, faceless and astonishingly frail in appearance. Then the light behind her collapsed into Marvel, and Ravleen's clone-father laid both hands on her shoulders, growling, "Remember."

He told her, "Behave yourself, daughter."

She shot a wild look at Ord, and shivered, as if cold.

The other immortals now dressed themselves in polite bodies and dated clothes. They numbered in the thousands, the same faces repeated from time to time. Ord looked for Chamberlain faces, knowing that eleven of them were here. Excluding Ian. And finally, after a few desperate moments, he found a sister's face that held bright and strong and exceptionally smug eyes that couldn't belong to anyone but Alice.

Just one face among many.

Almost invisible in that ocean of talent and arrogance and bounded rationality and boundless dreams.

Adelaide touched him on the shoulder, saying, "Tell us. Every way you wish, tell us what you came here to tell."

Then she said, "Ord," after a little pause.

Suddenly, he wasn't afraid anymore. Or sad. Or plagued by doubt. He sensed that this was where he belonged; and, with that thought, he took a bold, micron-long step forward, then turned, and, with a variety of mouths, he told the Great Ones about the destruction of the Core, and the ruin of the Peace, and their deaths, and the collapse of their Families. If they continued with their perilous work, that was what would happen. He promised them. Then he shook his head, telling portions of his own story, showing what his eyes had seen of death and despair, and hatred, and revenge. Disaster heaped upon disaster, and even those miseries hadn't yet run their course when he'd abandoned the future, escaping to here. To now.

"You have to stop your work," he told them.

Again, and again, and always in some new fashion.

He showed them the magnitude of their doom. Casualty figures. Images of wars and environmental disasters. He looked at their faces, saying "Adelaide will die. Marvel will die. And you. And *you*. And *all* of you, there!"

Staring past bright, unblinking eyes, he wondered: Are they impressed?

But they *had* to be impressed. Enthralled, even. Any sentient mind would have no choice but be astonished with such an epic, if not with the little boy telling it.

Ord found himself wishing that at least a few in his audience were thinking: "What a brave, noble young man he is. . . ."

After every horror he'd been through, these dense moments felt almost easy. Anticlimactic, if anything. He was speaking rationally to reasoning beings, and when he concluded his speech, there was no choice but to congratulate himself. What Ord had spent ages practicing—the culmination of this desperate quest—ended with a glacial silence punctuated with just enough nodding faces to warm him. To make him smile in turn. And for the first time in what seemed like forever, he could allow himself the luxury of an unfettered optimism.

Then Adelaide spoke again.

"*You* tell it now," she said to another visitor. Her heavy round and excessively calm face said, "Mr. Nuyen. It's your turn now."

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Xo looked like a youngish man. In every Nuyen face lay a simplicity meant to fool observers. In this Nuyen's voice, there were currents. Great irresistible pushes of emotion wrapped around an armored logic. Xo told the same story, but from his peculiar vantage point. Then he admitted what everyone sensed for themselves: He had been modified by his own Family, given weapons of mind and spirit for the purpose of subduing Ord.

"But my heart changed," he confessed. "My Family's treachery drove me into your camp. Your fold."

"Good," a thousand voices declared.

"Thank you," Adelaide said, putting an end to his speech.

Xo dipped his head, as if humbled.

"Madam Sanchex?"

Marvel shook his clone-daughter, as if she needed to be awakened. Then with a low thunder, he told her, "Be honest, and quick, and spare nothing!"

Which was what Ravleen did.

"Alice came home and blamed herself for everything. And I blamed her, but not for everything." Dark eyes simmered, and the dark voice grew louder. "I hated the bitch for destroying my family and my life. And when she gave Ord her talents, it was easy to hate him, too." She bristled. Growled. Smacked her flat belly with both fists. "Then the Nuyens taught me how to hate him even more, and they gave me the weapons to butcher him. Which I nearly did. More than once, I nearly killed him. But I didn't. *Couldn't*. And in the end, I threw away my weapons to put myself here.

"With you.

"And let me tell you something . . ." She paused.

"I still hate this baby Chamberlain. But I like *you* ugly fuckers even *less,* you stupid arrogant shits-of-god—!"

Again, silence.

Marvel shook his filthy-mouthed daughter, as punishment. But he didn't say a public word, and Ravleen seemed to find pleasure in the sudden dislocation of both shoulders.

Then, Ian spoke.

He placed himself in front of Ord, remarking, with a slightly irritated tone, "You didn't mention at least one critical thing, son."

Ord thought: "I did not."

Ord asked: "What item?"

"Since you've come from the future," said Ian. Then he added, "Apparently," with a darkness wrapped around the word. And with a weary shake of his head, he said, "You should have learned the technical particularities. If only to prove that you're genuine." He paused, glancing up at the looming nautilus. Then he said, "Tell us." He asked, "What exactly did we do here, and what went so wrong, and to the best of your knowledge, *why* did it go wrong? Or would you rather not share those details with your elders?"

In his secret mind, Ord thought: "No. Don't do this!"

In his public mind and with every graceful voice, he described the obscure details that Alice had given him. Even now, he barely understood the bones of the science. There were some monumental mathematics that always struck Ord as being more strange than compelling. Capturing a baby universe was just the smallest part of the magic. Crossing over into the Baby brought the gravest dangers. Opening an umbilical wide enough for a soul to pass through, but allowing nothing of the new universe to gush into this

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one . . . that's what these entities had attempted, and that's where the calamities lay waiting. . . .

Ord recited everything, including times accurate to a fraction of a femtosecond and the names of those most directly in charge; and when he finished dishing out the specific blame, he again felt a wave of optimism, confident for every good reason that, at last, his quest was finished.

But hope died a swift death.

The briefest silence ended with a sudden "Thank you," from Ian. From Adelaide. From perhaps a thousand voices scattered about the chamber. Then it was Ian who showed him another wide grin, clapping hands around his shoulders and shaking him with a friendly violence, telling Ord, "Well, now. Now we know."

Saying to everyone:

"And from here *on,* we'll be sure not to step anywhere near those mistakes!"

5

When I meet you for the first time, I'll have never seen anything so large or impressive as you . . . my fantastically powerful and ancient sister. . . .

Likewise, when I saw you just now . . . I have never seen anything so tiny as you seemed to be . . . standing in that crowded room, shoulder to shoulder with all those vast and elderly gods. . . .

—Ord, in conversation

Xo spoke next.

With a quiet gasp, he asked, "You *still* want to finish it? The Baby? Knowing what you know?"

Adelaide told him happily, "Not only will we finish it, we will finish it *now.* Now that we know what *can't* work, we can push on to the logical ends—"

"No!" a voice cried out.

Ord's voice.

"You can't seriously think of it . . . that's just insane—!"

"Quiet," Ian cautioned. "Be quiet, son."

In a booming voice, Adelaide asked, "Why did we build the wormhole?" Followed by her immediate reply, "It was to give us fair warning. To allow us to escape from the inescapable trap. Which in turn lets us do what is best, in the finest way, leaving the galaxy wealthier and happier because of us. *Us.*"

Ravleen said, "No," quietly. Angrily. Almost whispering.

Ord glanced at her. For an instant, he wondered if she had managed to keep some little weapon. That was her habit. Always hold something in reserve; that was the way of every Sanchex. He found himself hoping that she would shake off her father's grip, and with a thought or the flick of some invisible finger, she would obliterate the experiment, the laboratory, and every last one of these idiot-souls.

But Ravleen just dropped her head, and shivered.

What the others were thinking, Ord couldn't guess. Contrived faces showed precisely what they wished to show, and, for the moment, they wore a seamless resolve. Even Alice, standing among her peers and superiors, wore an exterior of perfect contentment—immune to any moral judgment that mere children could bring to bear.

"And now," Ian declared, "let us finish our good work!"

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Hundreds of voices said, "Yes. Finish!"

But what Ord heard best were the little knots and twists of silence. A half-born doubt, perhaps.

Ian placed both hands on Ord's shoulders, asking, "Would you like to remain with us, son? We'd certainly let you watch."

Ord whispered, "Alice."

With a caring, benevolent voice, the ancient man remarked, "We have asked and asked. But it seems that your sister wants nothing to do with you."

Louder, Ord called out, "*Alice!*"

Xo straightened his back, telling Adelaide, "I'll stay here."

Ravleen remarked to Marvel, "I want to stay and watch. And laugh when you fuck it all up again!"

One last time, Ord shouted, "*Alice—!*"

But he was staring up at the nautilus shell—that contrivance of genius—and dream—shouting at the machinery, "I have a private, personal message for Alice! From Thomas. From Brother Perfect."

Murmurs passed along a thousand channels.

Thomas was living nearby, embracing a curious existence that blended the grandest technologies with a Stone Age purity. And almost since Alice's birth, Thomas and his sister had shared a closeness, a deeply felt intimacy, that could still cause their father to put on an angry sneer.

"Enough!" Ian growled. "She says she doesn't—"

"Wait," said a new voice. A third hand dropped on the boy's shoulder. Smaller, and warmer. And even relaxed, the grip was fabulously strong.

Ord closed his eyes.

"What's this message?" Alice inquired, on a private channel.

"Not here," Ord replied. With his old-style mouth.

Ian gave a low snort.

But Alice seemed to laugh, savoring that whiff of parental disapproval. "Where would you like to be, little man?"

On the private channel, he suggested a place.

"Why?" Alice blurted. But in the next instant, she dragged him across a great distance, and made him enormous again, along with herself, the two of them arriving in an obscure storeroom tucked into the basement of the resurrected mansion.

"I would wander into this place," Alice admitted. "Now and again. When I was a girl, and I thought that I wasn't supposed to be here."

In one sense, it was just the two of them. But Ord could feel the others, their massive talents pressed together, sometimes shifting positions like arms hunting for comfort, masses flowing around one another and through the stale air. A curved plaster wall lay on one side. A tighter curve lay opposite it, wrapped around the central staircase. Every wall was hidden by cabinets and portraits and shelves and the innumerable heirlooms that made the room feel even smaller than it was. Everything was as Ord remembered it, except that each item seemed new, and clean, and in perfect repair. This is where he had first seen Alice. He stepped out of her grip and turned, taking a first hard look at his sister.

Alice was wearing a youngish face and a stocky body, her red hair shaggy and a little unkempt, her clothes comfortable to the point of being baggy—an ensemble of flesh and fabric that would suit any artist working on her masterpiece.

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"More than anyone," he said to her.

"More than anyone . . . what. . . ?"

"The project is *yours,*" he remarked. "Every success has felt your hand, and whatever follows will be the same."

"Good," she replied.

Her face appeared unimpressed. Even bored.

"And yet," he added, staring hard at the bright blue eyes. "What you've accomplished, in the end, isn't enormous. A tweak here, an inspiration there. Certainly nothing that couldn't have been accomplished by someone else. In another day or another million years. What does it matter?"

The bored face lifted, staring at a certain portrait.

On a sunny day, Ian had posed outside the Chamberlain home, wearing a suit of fine fabrics and what could only be called a forced smile. That long-ago Ian looked weary, and sad, and Ord could almost hear the painter coaxing him to smile. "The warm smile of a hero," the painter might have said. "Please, sir. Will you?"

For all the world, Ian had tried to look like a man worth trusting. With your life, and your children's lives, and the unborn souls of trillions. And he had been a good, caring person—exactly the sort to be trusted with godly powers. As a young man, he had helped end the wars that had plagued humanity from its inception. Ian and Marvel and the rest of the Thousand had saved their species. Their home world. And the worlds circling distant suns. Then they hammered together the Great Peace with its elaborate rules and conventions, blessings and freedoms. And after all of that, the hero had stood in the summer sun. Wearing a fine suit and an honest face, its expression centered upon a weary, almost anemic smile.

"Is it our father?" asked Ord.

Alice understood the question. His intent. She shrugged as if the question wasn't important, then said, "You're surprised. Why? Didn't I warn you that he was here?"

"In a fashion," he allowed.

She acted deaf. Indifferent, and relentlessly bored. With the pale tips of two fingers, she touched the portrait, and a thick thread of instantly hardened paint emerged from behind Ian's simple gray tie. It represented an old-style optical cable that would have allowed him to join the Earth's various systems; for the portrait, the cable had been tucked out of sight, preserving the illusion of unalloyed humanity. And as Alice accomplished her little trick, Ord mentioned, "That's exactly what you did when we first met. And I thought you were being exceptionally rude to the memory of our great father."

A half-laugh.

Then she turned to face him, admitting, "You are a genuine puzzle to me. You and your little friends. . . ."

"You never imagined us, did you?"

"Oh," she purred, "I envisioned *every* contingency. At least once. At least long enough to discount each one in turn."

Ord said nothing.

"And you brought along that *Nuyen,*" she added, her tone disapproving. Disgusted. "A born liar with some odd little talents that I don't quite recognize—"

"Do you think we're lying?" Ord asked.

Then he answered his own question, saying, "No." Telling her, "You believe. You have no choice."

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"Nothing but success, this time." She said the words by a hundred means, then, with her old-style mouth told him, "Thank you. For your sacrifices, and your selfless help. Thank you for that."

"And if the umbilical fails *this* time?"

She offered the obvious. "Someone else returns to now. To here. Perhaps the baby Chamberlain. You, or some new incarnation of you. And we'll make new corrections, and when *that* doesn't work . . . you'll return again, and *again*. . . ."

"Forever," he muttered.

"If necessary."

She sounded confident. Defiant, even. But Alice let him see something else lurking in her bright blue eyes.

"I could have failed," Ord reported.

No reaction.

"Next time, I *might* fail."

But Alice had already considered every possibility. Even the obscure and unlikely had been recognized, and she would keep playing with these elaborate models until the fun was wrung out of them.

"Maybe you're the last messenger," she offered. "And we've made the last correction. And now we are going to build a new universe! The first of thousands. Of millions! Until every citizen of the Milky Way can inherit her own. . . !"

Ord was crying again.

Shuffling to one of the tall cabinets, he opened a crystal door and reached past a sphere of perfect crystal. When his hand emerged, he was clutching a mug carved from pink granite. Quietly, he said, "Thomas gave this to me."

"A talent, is it?"

When he placed the mug in Alice's hands, it turned into a small human head. A Chamberlain face and hair. The disembodied head laughed until she closed her fingers around it, and suddenly she was laughing in the same boisterous way. Then she quit laughing, and looking at Ord with a mixture of disdain and puzzlement, she admitted, "I have this little talent already. It makes you see what's good and funny in a catastrophe."

She asked, "Is this it? Is this Thomas' important, wondrous message?"

Again, the invisible masses slipped around them, followed by a fat pulse of energy flowing to where it was needed.

"I know what you're thinking," he assured her.

"You'd like to believe so," Alice said.

Then, after a pause, she prompted him. "So tell me. About what I'm thinking."

"You're counting the worlds that you've terraformed. The nearby worlds. You're weighing the colonists living on them. You're calculating. How many people can die before you grow uneasy? How many worlds die before you become sick? And when will the ruin become so horrible that you have no choice but try to stop it?"

Alice opened her mouth, and closed it.

"You came back to the Earth," he said. "Alone. No other Chamberlain, or any Sanchex . . . or *anyone* . . . willingly shouldered the blame. Not like *you* did, Alice. Which makes me wonder why you aren't doing everything to stop this mess now—"

"But I am," she interrupted.

Then she said, "In these last moments, I have pleaded with everyone,

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telling them that I don't agree. Not with Ian. Or Adelaide. The risk is too great. We should dismantle the Womb now. And all of the machinery that feeds it."

"You've said that?"

"And I'm not the only doubter," she added.

Another invisible mass drifted around them, then hovered.

In his most private whisper, Ord offered one last detail. "Did I mention? If events play out in the same way . . . and the umbilical turns unstable . . . then one of *them* is going to slide into the baby universe, abandoning ours when we need it most. . . ."

"Who?" asked the blue eyes.

"Ian," he replied.

"You're certain?"

Ord told what he knew. And nothing more.

Again, Alice looked up at the portrait. Considering.

For a silvery instant, Ord felt a new confidence trying to gather inside him.

But then Alice said, "Here," and handed back the granite mug. "I don't need this." Then looking everywhere but at Ord, she added, "Honestly, you don't know me at all. Do you, little brother? Now do you?"

6

I will be you. . . .

I will wear your talents for thousands of years, and I will study your oceans of memory . . . and make myself intimate with your desires and curiosities and your very rare fears, and that boundless fierce hot pride of yours. . . .

Honestly, Alice . . . there will be long centuries when my closest, finest friend will be your pride. . . !

—Ord, in conversation

Again, Ord stood before the Womb.

With Xo. With Ravleen. And with a legion of entities continuously jostling with one another, trying to place as much of themselves as close to the event as possible. It was exactly like being jammed into a tiny room with an army of eager, graceless children. It was suffocating, and embarrassing, and Ord nearly begged to be excused from this shameless mayhem. He hungered for distance, for the chance to immerse himself in solitude. Watching what he could bear. Wishing that Chance or some far-flung Creator would take pity on his siblings, guiding them to an ending fortunate and fair.

But when Ord looked up, he discovered new eyes. All of the careful, exhaustive preparations had been finished; the coiling shell was nothing but an inert and convenient vessel helping to protect the business within. And suddenly, he could *see* the business. Nestled at the center of the nautilus was a simple, spherical vessel built from some ultimate species of strange matter. Matter forged on the brink of a black hole. Infinitely strong, and nearly infinitely small. But dense. Incapable of leaking light or any other flavor of information. Yet somehow his eyes peered inside. Into Planck space. Into a frothy, furious realm where existence and nonexistence shared a perpetual dance. A fantastic wilderness of potential and relentless chaos, and Ord couldn't do anything but stare, transfixed by the mere sight of it. . . .

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And at the sphere's center:

The Baby.

A single newborn universe. Indistinguishable from trillions of its siblings, and, according to various dreamy geometries, more remote to Ord than the ends of his own universe. Yet he could see it easily. Easily. And he could make out the tiny and swift strange-matter machines assembled around it, each doing one precise and instantaneous job, laying the careful groundwork for the umbilical.

Someone whispered, "Beautiful."

Xo.

As they watched, spellbound, a thousand baby universes blinked into existence. And each vanished as swiftly into the hyperuniverse, their existence beginning with an inflationary burst and ending with an absolute chill or some grand collapse. And between birth and death, what? Not life, Ord knew. In the vast majority of the new universes, life and sentience and all the blessings and the curses that came with them were impossible. Their universe was a grand exception. One out of a trillion trillion trillion, probably. Here, in the human realm, energy and time were almost perfectly balanced, and the physical laws made life evolve with a destined ease, then left that life with both the time and the means to do every great thing, and every awful one, too—

"Closer," said a whispering voice.

Alice.

Ord obeyed, slipping between half a dozen entities. A micron closer, if that. And then he realized that he could now measure the slow, steady passage of the nanoseconds. Here, time was an extraordinarily slow business. Whatever was to happen would happen long before the next heartbeat. And thinking that, he turned toward Alice, ready with a sly comment . . . some easy noise about how little time it takes to ruin a lot of people's very long day. . . .

But he couldn't find Alice.

He recognized Xo and he recognized the glowering shape of Ravleen. But his sister had vanished, or she hadn't been close to begin with. Which was when he finally realized that the voice urging them forward wasn't hers. No, not at all.

"Closer," he repeated, reaching for the others.

Xo glanced at Ord, then looked up at the Baby again. Hard, and close.

Ravleen was drifting behind some ancient entity. But not a Sanchex. Marvel had vanished, too. And unencumbered by her father's grip, Ravleen was able to push her way through the near-god, leaving it more embarrassed than injured.

"Be more careful," the entity growled.

Ravleen gave a snorting laugh, then took Ord by his offered hand, squeezing until what passed for bone had splintered.

Ord winced, and grinned.

Then he healed the hand before anyone could notice, and he looked back into the staring, compressed bodies. He found Ian. And Adelaide. But both of them were using every eye to stare at the Womb. Three tiny children couldn't matter less. Keep still, and quiet, and they might be forgotten here.

Here was among the closest of the close.

The nautilus hung over them—a leviathan smaller than a microbe.

"What now?" someone asked.

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Xo.

Ord thought, "I don't know," and felt as if he was lying. So he peered inside himself, every explanation waiting for him there.

"Something's different," Xo whispered. "About you."

Then, "What did Alice give you?"

Thomas's stone mug. But no, something else was hidden inside the mug. A different package of small potent talents, all of them instantly familiar to him. Familiar, but never used before. He was holding the tools necessary to manipulate things too small to be real. Tools that were perfectly common here. Tools that few would notice, and no one would think twice about. And with them came the perfect grace necessary to wield them in novel ways.

Ord started to reply, but Xo was speaking again, almost amused when he commented, "And you, Ravleen. You smell different, too."

He asked, "What did your father give you—?"

"Plenty," said Ravleen with a smug whisper and a matching grin.

She said, "I could murder both of you. You fucks."

But her eyes couldn't stay on them. Instead, they returned to the Baby, and with a quiet thunder, she said, "But first," and showed them a wild, joyous grin. "First I'll murder something even worse than *you,* you fucks. . . !"

Over the next few nanoseconds, they remained unnoticed, and free, and in various secret voices, Ord shared Alice's plans with his companions.

But was there enough time?

The Baby was growing, expanding and brightening as vast sums of energy were drawn from the rawest nothing. And the umbilical was growing beside and within it, striving to link the Baby with this frigid, nearly empty universe . . . the machinery as delicate as it was sturdy, and blindly persistent in its duties, every critical event happening too quickly even for their eyes to follow it. . . .

"Now," said Ord.

Said Alice.

And like that, a hundred scattered entities were in motion. The children were nearest, and smallest, accelerating to the brink of light-speed, passing into one of the tentacular conduits and striking the nautilus' shell where it was thinnest. Ord wielded an elaborate pick that punched open a hole that existed only as a quantum fluke. A gap that couldn't remain stable for even a fraction of a nanosecond. But it was large enough and persistent enough for the others to follow. And as each of them slipped inside, Ord turned loose another one of Alice's talents, leaving them in an even more compressed state—a hundred white-hot flecks suddenly tiny, almost invisible, each darting around inside the shell's outermost chamber, their shared light barely able to fill this suddenly enormous volume.

Ord's pick dissolved, leaving the wall with no memory of a hole.

Marvel shouted, "With me! My Family!"

Ravleen joined her father and every other Sanchex, following the coil toward its center. Toward the Baby.

Then Alice joined Ord. No other Chamberlains, but them. She had a few talents packed tight and a human form taken out of polite convenience. A half-smile on a thinner face. The hair kept short. Simple clothes with a martial character. A serious stare from those infinite eyes. Then with a human voice, she told him, "I'm not going to congratulate you."

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She said, "Let's see if we can do anything good, first."

For a moment, the nautilus seemed to shiver, as if some great hand had carefully taken hold of it.

Then, nothing.

An odd thought occurred to Ord.

"I've been here before," he confided to his sister.

She looked surprised. Impatient, even. "What do you mean?"

"When you came home. To find me, and confess." Why was he bothering with this? "I was in the middle of a wargame. Defending my snow fort from the hated Blues. And you helped me win that war."

Alice almost laughed.

"Did I?" she said.

What a ridiculous, stupid thing to mention. Ord wanted to apologize for mentioning it, except that an apology would waste even more time.

But Alice found some reason to say, "Tell me about it."

"About what?"

She touched him. Her flesh was hotter than the interior of a sun, but the hand felt cool, even chilled against Ord's forearm, and her strong certain voice forced him to relax.

"Humor me," she said.

She said, "Tell me, brother. What happened in that little war of yours?"

7

Xo won the war for us. . . .

You won the war for me. . . .

And with nothing but a few well-placed, thoroughly believed words. . . .

—Ord, in conversation

The nautilus shivered again.

Lightly.

Then the Great Ones began wrenching open holes in the chamber wall, using the same type of pick that Ord had employed. It was a simple and blunt and artless attack. There wasn't time for cleverness, nor the need. Their enemies were scarce, and without Sanchexes on the front lines, they were missing their sharpest teeth.

Ord raced across his little parcel of wall, patching holes until there were too many to patch. Then he wielded a simple device designed to motivate hyperdense twists of matter. A weapon now. Blunt, and cruel. Effervescent bodies crawled from the holes, and he jabbed them, cooking their senses and what passed for flesh. Dozens writhed. For a slender instant, it seemed as if they were soulless monsters deserving every misery. Then one of those invaders managed to slip past, vast and cloud-like until it compressed itself into a body like his own. A face appeared. Female, from a minor Family, and twisted by the pain. Or was that an illusion? A bid for sympathy?

Reaching for Ord, she begged, "Stop, please!" And he eased his weapon into her exposed belly, flinging her back into the hole.

Twenty like her emerged in the next instant.

And chasing them, hundreds more.

From behind, Alice called out, "Retreat!"

On a prelaid thread of hypermatter, Ord raced deeper into the curling

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shell. That first chamber ended with a curved wall smaller than the last, and, in its precise center, a doorway had been wrenched open. Ord dove through and every other defender but one or two managed to follow before Alice cut the threads, then sealed the door, the hypermatter collapsing upon itself, turning unstable, then dissolving into hard radiation and a searing heat.

Like the head of a beaten drum, the wall shook.

Then it grew still again.

The new chamber was smaller, a smaller outer wall needing to be defended, and the next attack was delayed, the attackers repairing themselves before prying open new holes and emerging again. But when they emerged, somewhere in the next nanosecond, it was the Chamberlains who came first. Ten siblings, plus Ian. As if to show Ord and Alice how alone they were. They came out of the tiny holes and put on suffering Chamberlain faces, and in angry loud and useless voices, they begged for reason. They promised Alice that anything could be forgiven. To Ord, they mentioned the pitfalls of youth and doubt. Then Alice screamed back at them, "Subjects you know nothing about!" And she yanked and yanked, bringing every defender possible through the next doorway, then flinging a mote of antimatter in the face of their enemies.

A smaller chamber, again.

And again, Ord fought until the fight was lost.

And he retreated again. He found himself counting his retreats with a grim precision. Twenty of them, eventually. And with each retreat, they would lose an ally or two. Someone was too slow, or someone had lost their spirit. Either way, the defenders got scarcer as the chambers got smaller, and they had followed the curling shell inward until there were barely three dozen of them floating in a chamber that left them feeling crowded.

Marvel appeared, reporting on his progress and his plans, absorbing the situation as well as possible. Then he returned to the Baby, leaving behind a single reinforcement in the form of his youngest daughter.

Ravleen showed the chamber a wide sneer.

"What do you apes know about fighting?" she asked.

Then with a mixture of rage and serene joy, she told them, "I've killed more worlds than you've ever built, you sorry, piss-filled apes!"

This time, the attackers didn't bother opening holes.

Instead they demolished the entire wall, a flash of gamma radiation leading the Great Ones in their charge, a chaotic melee erupting and ending almost before anyone could measure the time spent.

Ord started to retreat, again.

Ravleen was stationed in the open doorway. She didn't bother with tools made into weapons. No, she had Sanchex weapons. Coupled with Sanchex emotions. With a clean and happy and much-practiced efficiency, she tortured any enemy foolish enough to come close. For a little instant, it looked as she might win the war herself. The chamber was suddenly jammed with stunned near-gods, and Ord squirmed past them, reaching the little doorway at the last possible instant. But when he extended one of his arms, Ravleen casually chopped it off and flung it back into his body. And she shredded him with her gaze, those black hate-soaked eyes shouting, "Do you think I'd let you pass—?!"

He screamed, too late.

Alice was on the other side of the open doorway. She looked at him with a longing, a massive sense of loss. Then Ravleen was through the door and

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grinning back at him, and the door had vanished. A thousand bodies grappled for Ord, and stunned him, choking off his wailing, "No!" before it could begin.

And he cried.

He stopped crying when Ian's voice was close. When it warmly assured him, "This is for the very best, son."

Then an unwelcome arm was thrown across Ord's shoulder.

And Ian hugged him as if they were, despite everything, the absolute best of friends.

The Great Ones were making quick preparations to obliterate the next wall. To press the advantage, bringing their attack to its logical, inevitable conclusion.

"The umbilical is almost finished," Ian reported.

Speaking to Ord.

"Marvel can't stop it now," he commented, speaking to everyone in the cramped surroundings. "The Baby and the passageway into the Baby . . . it's reached the point where all of us, working as One, would have trouble stopping it now. . . ."

Ord said nothing, glancing at the white-hot faces.

Adelaide was close. But not too close. She looked like a drab, distracted version of Alice. She looked heavy, and tired, and in ways that couldn't be neatly measured, she seemed tired of life.

"But that isn't what Marvel is doing," Ord reported.

His voice was quiet. Almost respectful.

No one seemed to hear him. Or care what he might have said. But then Adelaide glanced in his direction, as if by chance, and with her own quiet voice asked, "What do you mean? What's Marvel trying to do?"

Ord made a show of saying nothing.

Dropping his face now.

Looking embarrassed, almost.

"Answer me," she pressed. "What? What's Marvel trying to do?"

Ord straightened, and hesitated. Then with a shrug, he said, "We can't stop the umbilical now. And Marvel knows it. So what he's going to do . . . what he and Alice decided was best . . . he will try to damage the umbilical enough that you, all of you here, have no choice but help to dismantle it before it fails, and catastrophically. . . ."

A panic began.

It was a buried, secretive panic. The faces themselves showed nothing.

But Ord could feel the Great Ones discussing the sudden possibility . . . measuring its likelihood and its logical counters . . . some enormous debate beginning and ending in the time it takes an unstable nucleus to decay. . . .

Casually, Ord looked past the Great Ones.

The rest of the prisoners were being kept at what was presumed to be a secure distance. Some watched the debate with a mixture of terror and graveyard pleasure, while the others took part. What if the Sanchexes were trying to do the unthinkable? And if they succeeded, could the umbilical be dismantled before it was too late? And if so, for how much longer? Ten nanoseconds? Two? Or was the last grain of sand tumbling now through the waist of the hourglass—?

Only one prisoner paid no attention to the useless discussion.

Wrapped inside an assortment of bindings, the lone Nuyen drifted apart from the others, his face simple and empty. Simple, and utterly harmless.

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While talents that wouldn't be born for another thirty thousand years began to reach out . . . deftly reaching into one soul, then another . . . unnoticed. . . .

8

We fall for tricks, I think, because we love them so much. . . !
—Ord, in conversation

The Chamberlain face appeared to be carved from some kind of pale whitish butter. Its flesh looked soft and slick, and tired, and the blue of the eyes had drained away, and what had started as bright red hair was now a dull, defeated gray. Adelaide was defeated. She knew it, and spent the next little moment accepting her defeat. Then with a public voice, she said, "Maybe we should," and she closed the whitish eyes before saying the rest of it. Saying to the others, "We should reconsider. I believe. In light of what we now know—"

"Reconsider nothing!" Ian roared.

He shot over to Adelaide, and with a booming voice told everyone, "In a thousand ways, we've nearly reached our goal, and we have no right—*none*—to lose our focus now! Do you hear me?"

Adelaide stared through him.

Quietly, fighting to sound perfectly reasonable, she admitted, "This is nothing but wrong. If Marvel does as the boy claims—"

"He will not!" said Ian.

He said, "I know Marvel. I've known him forever, nearly. He's smart and honorable, and you can't tell me that he would ever take such a risk—"

"We're talking about a *Sanchex,*" someone reminded them.

"Sculpted rage," said another. "That's what they are!"

"We can't accept the risk," said a third. Said Adelaide. Then she attempted to gain the upper hand, dismissing Ian by saying, "You don't know Marvel. And you're not my father. Strictly speaking, you're just a conceit, a whimsy, that we added to your surviving talents because it seemed like a show of respect. . . ."

Ian's face betrayed nothing.

But the eyes brightened, and a sputtering voice emerged from deep inside him. "I am Ian Chamberlain! As much as you're my dear, loving daughter, I am!"

The briefest silence.

"It wasn't respect," Adelaide muttered. And with a great sadness, she said, "It was easy. Making you Ian again."

"But I've always been Ian!" he cried out.

She shook her head.

"What? Because I'm supposed to have died in that supernova . . . you don't believe that I've always been. . . ?"

She stared at him, eyes back to blue again. A cold, cobalt blue.

"No," she said.

"I'll tell you something," he trumpeted. "All of you! Listen! You know this for yourselves, even if you don't have the courage to admit it." Then he hesitated, perhaps feeling the slightest tug of doubt. But the emotion arose from a place without significance. He dismissed the doubt with a snort and a hard laugh. "When I supposedly died? When history claims that I flung

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myself to the aid of those poor people? What I *did,* little ones, is quite the opposite! What I flung at the dying star was my least consequential part. I was saving what was vital—all that I cherished—and rescuing those incompetent apes cost me nothing. Nothing but a few scraps of dead skin from the end of my least important finger."

A cold, almost bottomless silence fell over the scene.

Ian didn't seem able to notice at first. Instead, he cocked his head as if hearing some great crescendo of applause, and he even attempted to smile. Then with a sturdy and reasoned tone, he reminded everyone, "I am talking about my philosophy here. It has so very little to do with the debate on hand."

Currents of opinion were shifting too quickly to be measured. Not even the participants could be sure of their own minds.

"The debate," he repeated.

"Do we persist?" he asked. "Or do we surrender to an empty threat?"

Silence.

And then, there wasn't silence.

There was a sound, low and growing. It came from nowhere before finding its source in Adelaide. The ancient and honorable and devoted daughter was leaking an incoherent rage, her face twisted in obvious pain . . . a living, fierce redness making the face shine . . . and she very carefully set her hands against Ian's chest, red against the deep gray of his make-believe blouse . . . and with a desperate anger that must have surprised her as much as anyone, she told him, "No, I won't let you. There's too much at risk—"

Ian gave a little gesture.

He was in possession of a certain tool. It was exactly the kind of instrument that a man who wants to carve off his humanness would create. And for the second time in his existence, he used it.

With a calm, surgical skill, he removed everything that was human from Adelaide. He took away her face. Her apparent skin and hair, and the eyes. The human voice. The ancient protoplasmic memories. Deep-buried instincts, and moralities learned as a girl, and even the name itself. Adelaide. Then he said the name to the incandescent ball that lay before him. "Adelaide," he said with a measured fondness. "This will teach you." And in the next moment, he used a second tool, and she was no more.

Adelaide was dead.

"But she isn't," Ian remarked, showing a human smile as he stared at the staring eyes and the hard-set mouths around him. "Dead, I mean. She persists here. Look at her talents! Everything that is important and useful about my daughter is alive still. Eager still. And she always will be."

The silence was hot. Opinions lay perched on a high and narrow point, no way to know who would tilt which way and how many would fall together.

Oblivious to the revulsion, Ian made a show of turning to face the chamber wall.

Then, with the strong, certain voice of a one-time general, he announced, "We're ready to make our next push. Get ready now. This is the perfect moment."

There wasn't any dissent yet.

Or even a flicker of genuine anger.

But the Great Ones had to stare at the creature that was trying to lead them, their long, glorious lives coming to this instant and this conundrum . . . and for entities accustomed to an infinite genius, they seemed, on the whole, to be awfully, awfully confused. . . .

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"Obliterate the wall," Ian called out.

Nothing happened.

"Do I need to do everything myself?" he asked.

The audience stirred.

Ord tasted shame, and the strangest little beginnings of fear.

Then again, Ian suggested, "We should make our final push. Now—"

Then the chamber wall evaporated, and for that first moment, it must have seemed to Ian as if he had won everything. A consensus had been reached. The attack was underway. But why was that wave of light pushing into his face? Had someone done the job badly, the wall imploding toward them by mistake?

Then everyone understood, too late.

The chamber wall had been obliterated from within, and the defenders were now the attackers. Pouring up from an even smaller chamber—from the very edge of the Baby's tiny womb—were Alice and Ravleen, and the other rebels, including Marvel and his Sanchexes, pressing hard with weapons and with relentless, rational voices.

"There's no more time!" they called out.

"There's only one choice left!" they screamed.

Then Alice grappled with Ian, shaking him and cursing him. Which only made him growl back at her, threatening, "I'll do to you what I did to your sister."

"What?" she asked. And she looked at Ord. "What did he do?"

Ord didn't have to say a word.

Then Alice yanked the tool from among her father's talents, and she carved off what was human about him. And to that shred, she said, "No, I won't kill you. Whatever happens, I want you to see. To feel. All of it, and with what's human! You sorry old shit!"

9

When I was a boy, and seamlessly predictable, I had a favorite door at the Chamberlain mansion, and each time I entered our house, I would reach high and gently touch the granite slab above.

Carved into the slab was our Family motto:

PRIDE AND SACRIFICE.

It was a tradition of mine, and a habit, and oftentimes it was done with no more thought than you'd put into any simple reflex. An easy gesture meant to remind me about the Chamberlain heritage and ideals, it was. But sometimes I'd wonder about my brothers and sisters, about those who had walked before me, perhaps a few of them, like me, reaching up to feel the cool hard pink of a stone half as old as our ancient world. I was touching those other hands, in a fashion. There was an honor in the gesture. An honor, and a joy. I belonged to a great and noble and enduring thing. That's what I would tell myself, and that's what I would believe.

Such a silly notion.

Not because our Family's honor is feeble. And not because our greatness will be gutted and left for dead.

No, what was silly was that sense of belonging to something enduring. Because the Chamberlains have existed for only a few million years, and that isn't a particularly long time. The granite itself was infinitely older than little us.

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We belong to something far more enduring than the Chamberlain name.
But you know that. Don't you, Alice?
The protoplasm in my hand.
And the genetics buried within.
As old as the pink stone, this life of ours is . . . and a good deal tougher than most everything else in this hard and cold universe. . . .

—Ord, in conversation

The battle remained exactly that. A raging bloodbath. In most ways, it was as vicious and desperate as any fistfight could be. But now ideas were being delivered in salvos. Potent memes and plans and schemes and piercing shouts and screamed pleas for cooperation came from countless mouths, and the combatants did their level best to ignore everything but their own considerable pain.

Time was on the march, and the Great Ones were bickering among themselves.

Ord leaped toward Xo, undoing his bindings and telling the little Nuyen, "Thank you for helping."

Asking, "How did you help?"

Asking, "And is there any way, maybe, you can do something now?"

With huge, sorry eyes, Xo regarded the mayhem. And almost embarrassed, he admitted, "I did nothing, almost. That talent . . . it fills a soul with the need to be honest, then makes the person more likely to act on that honesty. . . ."

Ord began searching for Alice.

Xo muttered, "I can't. Help. There are too many—"

Where was Alice?

"—for me to accomplish—"

And what about Marvel? And Ravleen?

"—anything important."

"Then do something small," Ord suggested. His voice was calm and sure, and swift, telling Xo exactly what he wanted done.

In the next instant, the same simple question occurred to everyone present. Each found it inside himself and herself, hearing it ask, "Whose voice don't I hear?"

Alice's voice.

As a body, they instantly heard her conspicuous absence. Each allocated senses to finding the Chamberlain, and each failed in that first fraction of a nanosecond. Then in the wake of their first sickly panic, they realized that Marvel was missing, too. Two critical voices, both silent. And as a body, in a rumbling whisper, each of them asked that suddenly obvious question:

"What is Alice doing?"

She wasn't in the next chamber, no.

But where the nautilus shell made another complete turn inward—in that tiny final chamber on the very brink of the Baby—was someone. Were three someones. Better senses than Ord's found them. Then it was a sprint across a distance almost too small to be measured, in a brief fraction of an instant that wasted far too much time. But Ord had already guessed where she was. He moved first, and fastest, plunging into a bizarre, ill-behaved realm on the frothy edge of Planck space; but instead of strangeness, he discovered a familiar if utterly contrived landscape.

Ord was suddenly running, beneath a sky of seamless white clouds; run-

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ning across a pasture buried deep beneath a most perfect snow. And rising up from the snow was what, at a glance, looked to be the Chamberlain mansion. But no, he realized that it was an even simpler structure, built from blocks of snow. A fort, perhaps. Something like the fort Ord had helped build, then defend, on those final days before everything changed.

A tunnel-like gate led into the interior.

To the Baby.

Two figures waited in the open. Each was dressed in white and carved from the snow. Like Ord was. He stopped just short of them and looked at the two Sanchex faces, and he glanced down at his own cold little hands, and something that could have been Ravleen's voice asked, "Do you recognize this place?"

She said, "It's my idea. To make it look this way."

He started to say, "I recognized it—"

Then the Great Ones marched out onto the pasture, pushing against each other until there wasn't any room left in this pretend world, and nowhere to move. And in a shared voice, they shouted toward the tall white fort, "Alice!"

Alice crawled from the tunnel.

Out of the mostly finished umbilical, and stood up.

And of all expressions, Alice decided to show them a snowy smile, remarking in a mild, even offhand way, "There's no more time, and this is what we will do. . . !"

"I'm going to try to break the umbilical. Now." Alice said it, then repeated herself. Then she added, "I count three weaknesses. Three opportunities coming soon. That's my analysis, and there's no time to debate my mathematics."

Alice was as expert as anyone, or more so.

"There's no time to calculate odds," she continued. "But if it looks as if the Baby's getting loose, we should be ready. We need to make ready now, and this is the only way to staunch this kind of wound. Should it come; when it comes. We need to set a black hole here," and she mashed the snow beneath her right foot. "Here," she repeated. "If I fail, the umbilical begins to unravel in another few moments. But we can absorb the worst of the leakage. At first. With a black hole serving as our cork—"

"Built how?" a thousand voices asked.

A careless few started to remind Alice that Sagittario was too distant to help, and so was every other naturally occurring black hole—

"We make our own hole!" Marvel roared.

"With what?" everyone wondered.

And then, they saw what was obvious, and painful. What caused each of them to wince in some deeply felt, entirely fresh way. And in that next little instant, several hundred of the Great Ones began retrieving those little pieces of themselves that were stuck deepest into the Womb. Yanking themselves free and rejoining the rest of their talents again. Preparing for that final instant when they would turn around completely, faces to the innocent stars, and with every last wisp of muscle at their disposal, they would run.

Flee.

Cowards, and criminals. But by all definitions, alive.

While the rest of their brothers and sisters packed their own talents and souls into a tighter and tighter and tighter mass, mashing themselves together, all of that genius turned to raw mass and their boundless strength pushing until the largest possible black hole was born. They would sacrifice

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themselves so that, for a day or two, or perhaps longer, the furies emerging from the umbilical would be swallowed whole. : . .

To everyone, Alice said, "I'm going back in now."

Great masses were shifting behind Ord, while other masses carefully held themselves perfectly still.

Then a new figure appeared beside Marvel.

Ian, judging by his appearance. By the way the old Sanchex held him tightly around the neck. And by the way the ancient, once-dead man sobbed now, his human face twisted with misery and remorse.

"Say your good-byes," said Alice.

She wanted everyone's good wishes, Ord imagined.

But she wasn't talking to everyone. She was looking directly at Ord, speaking only to his face, telling him with her most determined voice, "I loaned you several talents. I need to use them. And you don't have time to pass them back to me."

Alice started to kneel, telling him, "I need your hands. So take an instant, and say your good-byes."

Ord looked abruptly at Xo.

And Ravleen.

They resembled children again. Startled, sickened children. But swirling inside their galloping emotions were things that couldn't be changed by any grand annihilation. Ravleen was still the feral girl who once served as his general during a war of snow, her soul blessed with a rage that couldn't be dismantled or defeated. Ord had to respect her, even now. And Xo was still that boy who could cheat anyone at any occasion. Which was why he had found his way into Ord's camp. Only a Nuyen could find enough treachery to turn traitor against his entire Family.

When Ord said, "Good-bye," the oddest little thought struck him.

Xo told him, "Be careful," with a sorry little voice.

Then Ravleen said, "Fuck *careful*. Be *brave!*"

Alice had already vanished into the umbilical.

Ord knelt and crawled. The snow had no discernible temperature, and he couldn't feel it with any hand. He crawled forward, then hesitated, looking back over his shoulder at the image of weepy, guilt-ripped Ian. Then Ord spoke. To Xo and Ravleen, he said, "There's an old expression. Have you heard it?"

A strange, uneasy pause.

"'The child is father to the man,'" Ord quoted.

Xo gave a little nod, pretending to understand.

Ravleen just snorted, and, with the meat of at illusionary foot, she kicked Ord in the ass, causing him to plunge into the failing umbilical.

10

My life . . . my entire existence, I think . . . is built around meeting you, Alice. . . .

Four times in this little life, according to my count, you have found the means to remake all that I am, and all that I believe. . . .

And each encounter comes with the odd, persistent epiphany that I don't know you . . . that I am touching the hand you're offering for the first time. . . .

—Ord, in conversation

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Together, Ord and Alice journeyed to the edge of their universe.

There wasn't room for illusions here. They weren't inside a tunnel, and the whiteness surrounding them didn't resemble snow, and their own bodies—compressed to the brink of nonexistence—had nothing left that resembled limbs or heads or any sort of mouth. But Ord could still imagine Alice walking beside him, her red hair long and needing to be combed and her clothes looking disheveled and artistic, and when her words found him, he imagined her voice. Solid. Buoyant. The fate of worlds were dangling over a maelstrom, but always some piece of Alice felt nothing but thrilled: Thrilled by what they were seeing, and by what they were doing, and how very honored, and blessed, the two of them were.

Stop, she said.

Ord imagined himself walking, and then, standing still.

What is it? he asked.

Here, she told him. Reach here.

What passed for her hand guided what passed for his. Then she explained how to use her little talent, and when.

In a sense, his hand was jabbed deep into the umbilical's wall.

Waiting.

On schedule, a critical system popped out of nonexistence, suddenly held in his grasp, and he closed his hand and yanked and felt the hand dissolve. Lost now. And nothing good coming of it.

He told Alice, Sorry.

It's all right, she said.

She told him, Success was a pretty unlikely bird. But I promise. We'll have a much better chance at our next station.

Ord imagined himself walking again.

He pictured himself with a boy's body and a boy's simple clothes. In his chest beat an old-style heart—young muscle driving a cool thick blood down living arteries, passing it through pink lungs and then through the rest of his living flesh. Suddenly he felt exceptionally fond of that heart. He felt tiny and sad, and sorry in all of the old ways, and he imagined himself crying as he walked beside his ancient sister, one of his cool little hands of blood and bone wiping at the salty tears, trying to push them back into his eyes.

Perhaps Alice could feel him crying.

Everything will work out for the best, she promised. If not at this next station, then at the third one. Or when you come back through the wormhole the next time, it will. Or the time after that.

If it doesn't work today—? he began.

She said, Ord.

She admitted, I left myself an escape route. Which doesn't surprise you very much, I suspect. And I promise, I'll hurry back to the Earth and meet you, and I will put everything back into motion again—

Will it be *me?* he had to ask.

The universe was built on innumerable quantum events, each too tiny to be observed completely, yet their cumulative effects leaving every detail of the future unknown. Unknowable. Suddenly, Ord found himself wielding a talent that explained quantum magic fully and simply. And bringing this sudden expertise to play, he asked again:

Will that person be me?

Stop here, said Alice.

He tried to visualize sunshine and a green meadow and Alice standing

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close to him, her nearest arm thrown over his shoulder, lending comfort. But meadows and sunshine were wonders that he couldn't quite remember anymore. Even the colors of the sky and the sky-fed grass were beyond him now.

Here, she told him.

Ord was standing in the umbilical's path. A trivial, short-distance talent tried to disrupt another one of the key systems. And for an instant, the attempt seemed to be working. Success was inevitable. He felt the system pushing into him, then pausing when it met resistance. But his talent had limits, and the umbilical was eager to finish its own construction. The system realigned itself, neatly and swiftly, and Ord was shoved aside. Which was when he found another new, unsuspected talent, remarking to Alice, We aren't going to. Succeed. Not today.

I know, she replied.

We can walk down the umbilical a trillion times, he explained to both of them. And we would stop its formation once. Or if we were exceptionally lucky, twice.

Alice said nothing.

Ord was moving again, dwelling on the enormity of things.

On the relentless impossibilities.

Alice caught him and said, It won't be you. The next time. There have to be little differences in experience, memories, and in personality, too. But he will be your age, and he will have your face. And without question, the boy will be a Chamberlain.

At the end of the umbilical lay nothingness.

Ord didn't need to be told what to do. He already knew. But they had arrived early, and they had no choice but to hold their ground, waiting for that narrow window of potential to offer itself.

Ord looked for his sadness.

Where was it?

Then Alice was close to him. Close enough that he couldn't be certain what was him and what was her. And one of their voices was whispering, asking:

Do you know what I first thought when I saw you? This time, I mean.

Alice was asking the question.

Quietly, Ord admitted, I don't know. What did you think?

That you were a brave and splendid young man, she said.

The words felt warm and slippery and sweet.

New talents were being spliced into Ord's nature. They didn't belong to Alice, no. They were part of the umbilical, knitted into its matrix as it was created . . . meant to be claimed by whichever entity came through here, on his way. . . .

On his way.

Where?

Ord looked for his sadness, but instead found an enormous, almost crushing fear.

If I was the one with the task of building a new universe, said a voice. Said Alice. If I was that person, do you know what I would make sure of?

What? he asked.

Very little, said Alice.

And she was laughing. Gently.

But there's one vital thing I *would* do, she added. My creation could be enormous and wondrous and full of delicious, unexpected twists. Of course. But I would make certain . . . make it inevitable, in fact . . . that its inhabi-

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tants could marshal the energies and skills necessary to build another living, breathing universe. But at a cost. An enormous and brutal, and even damning, cost. And do you know why, Ord?

He knew why.

But she was already saying it.

To create a new universe . . . that's an exercise that shouldn't be done without horrific consequences. Otherwise, naturally . . . every hackass and sentient soul would build them. In their private shops, during their spare evenings. And for all of the horrors that we've inflicted on our little galaxy . . . do you see it, Ord. . . ?

I do, he thought.

He said.

Maybe this is how it works in our universe, she continued. We're destined to build Babies, and always, the umbilicals will fail us. But each catastrophe gives birth to a new universe. A better one, we can hope.

Ord said nothing. Waiting.

Maybe that's why you were able to find your way back through time. Despite the very long odds, you made it here because the soul that created *our* universe made such things not just possible, but inevitable. . . .

To his considerable surprise, Ord discovered that he wasn't scared. The fear had drained out of him, leaving behind nothing but a strange weepy joy that kept building and twisting inside him.

Or maybe I'm utterly wrong, Alice allowed. Maybe I'm trying to fool myself, lending the universe a face that it doesn't want, much less need—

Maybe I'll stop the umbilical, said Ord.

This time, he added.

Perhaps you will, she said agreeably.

But there was still some waiting to be done. They stood together beside the nothingness, feeling the Baby clawing at its cage . . . and once again, at the last possible instant, Ord tried to imagine the touch and heat of a hand . . . and with that, Alice took hold of him, and squeezed, and as the nothingness began to fall away. . .

the last touch of his life
two hands gently holding one another
and then
and then
and then
everything ○

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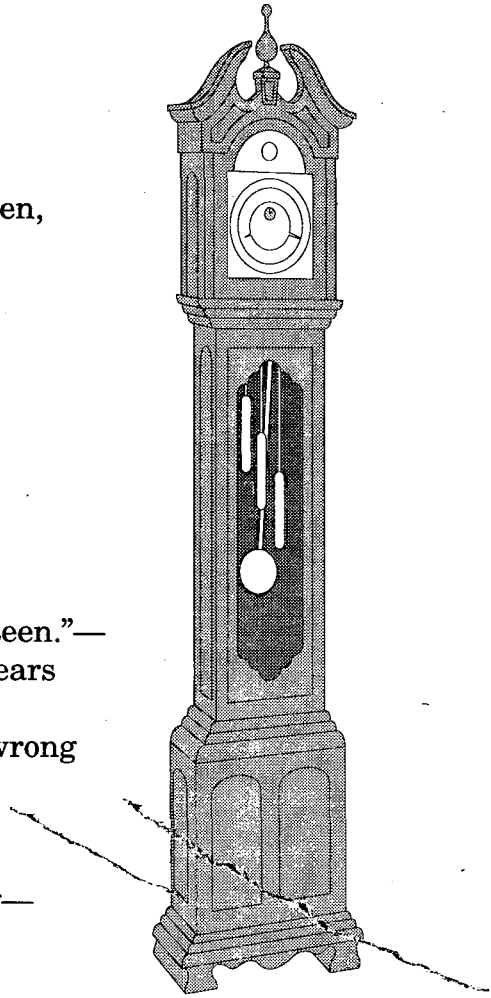
TIME TRAP



Before he died, my father
traveled backward
in time,
leaving spouses and children,
and houses behind
in the unblinking present,
while he sped back
to nicknames, and places,
and people long past,
until talking with him
became a frantic search
for the right button
on the time elevator.
Each gentle correction—
"I'm forty, Daddy, not fourteen."—
caused pain, the glaze of tears
as he realized that
he had gotten something wrong
again.
He came at last to rest
in a terrible moment—
unreliable, always shifting—
where those he loved best
he did not really know.
He could see less and less
as we betrayed him,
speeding into the future,
leaving him behind,
a fixed point,
trapped,
mired in time.

—Karen Haber

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COMP.BASILISK FAQ

Revised 27 June 2006 by David Langford

1. What is the purpose of this newsgroup?

To provide a forum for discussion of basilisk (BLIT) images. Newsnet readers who prefer low traffic should read comp.basilisk.moderated, which carries only high-priority warnings and identifications of new forms.

2. Can I post binary files here?

If you are capable of asking this question you MUST immediately read news.announce.newusers, where regular postings warn that binary and especially image files may emphatically not be posted to any newsgroup. Many countries impose a mandatory death penalty for such action.

3. Where does the acronym BLIT come from?

The late unlamented Dr. Vernon Berryman's system of math-to-visual algorithms is known as the Berryman Logical Imaging Technique. This reflected the original paper's title: "On Thinkable Forms, with notes toward a Logical Imaging Technique" (Berryman and Turner, *Nature,* 2001). Inevitably, the paper has since been suppressed and classified to a high level.

4. Is it true that science fiction authors predicted basilisks?

Yes and no. The idea of unthinkable information that cracks the mind has a long SF pedigree, but no one got it quite right. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), the novel that popularized cyberspace, is often cited for its concept of "black ice" software that strikes back at the minds of hackers—but this assumes direct neural connection to the net. Basilisks are far more deadly because they require no physical contact.

Much earlier, Fred Hoyle's *The Black Cloud* (1957) suggested that a download of knowledge provided by a would-be-helpful alien (who has superhuman mental capacity) could overload and burn out human minds.

A remarkable near-miss features in *The Shapes of Sleep* (1962) by J.B. Priestley, which imagines archetypal shapes that compulsively evoke particular emotions, intended for use in advertising.

Piers Anthony's *Macroscope* (1969) described the "Destroyer sequence," a purposeful sequence of images used to safeguard the privacy of galactic communications by erasing the minds of eavesdroppers.

The comp.basilisk community does not want ever again to see another posting about the hoary coincidence that *Macroscope* appeared in the same year and month as the first episode of the British TV program *Monty Python's Flying Circus,* with its famous sketch about the World's Funniest Joke that causes all hearers to laugh themselves to death.

5. How does a basilisk operate?

The short answer is: we mustn't say. Detailed information is classified beyond Top Secret.

The longer answer is based on a popular-science article by Berryman (*New Scientist,* 2001), which outlines his thinking. He imagined the human

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mind as a formal, deterministic computational system—a system that, as predicted by a variant of Gödel's Theorem in mathematics, can be crashed by thoughts that the mind is physically or logically incapable of thinking. The Logical Imaging Technique presents such a thought in purely visual form as a basilisk image which our optic nerves can't help but accept. The result is disastrous, like a software stealth-virus smuggled into the brain.

6. Why "basilisk"?

It's the name of a mythical creature: a reptile whose mere gaze can turn people to stone. According to ancient myth, a basilisk can be safely viewed in a mirror. This is not generally true of the modern version—although some highly asymmetric basilisks like B-756 are lethal only in unreflected or reflected form, depending on the dominant hemisphere of the victim's brain.

7. Is it just an urban legend that the first basilisk destroyed its creator?

Almost everything about the incident at the Cambridge IV supercomputer facility where Berryman conducted his last experiments has been suppressed and classified as highly undesirable knowledge. It's generally believed that Berryman and most of the facility staff died. Subsequently, copies of basilisk B-1 leaked out. This image is famously known as the Parrot for its shape when blurred enough to allow safe viewing. B-1 remains the favorite choice of urban terrorists who use aerosols and stencils to spray basilisk images on walls by night.

But others were at work on Berryman's speculations. B-2 was soon generated at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory and, disastrously, B-3 at MIT.

8. Are there basilisks in the Mandelbrot Set fractal?

Yes. There are two known families, at symmetrical positions, visible under extreme magnification. No, we're not telling you where.

9. How can I get permission to display images on my website?

This is a news.announce.newusers question, but keeps cropping up here. In brief: you can't, without a rarely granted government license. Using anything other than plain ASCII text on websites or in e-mail is a guaranteed way of terminating your net account. We're all nostalgic about the old, colorful web, and about television, but today's risks are simply too great.

10. Is it true that Microsoft uses basilisk booby-traps to protect Windows 2005 from disassembly and pirating?

We could not possibly comment. ○

David Langford lives in Reading, England, with seventeen Hugo awards for best fanwriter and best fanzine—the fanzine being Britain's quirky SF newsletter *Ansible*. His most recent book is *Josh Kirby A Cosmic Cornucopia*. The book is a collection of the artist's paintings and Mr. Langford's commentary.

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TO LEUCHARS

Rick Wilber

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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Rick Wilber's most recent story for us, "Stephen to Cora to Joe, or The Truth As I Know It," featured the author Stephen Crane. It was published in our June 2000 issue on the hundredth anniversary of Crane's death. "To Leuchars" is part of Mr. Wilber's "S'hudonni Mercantile Empire" series of tales. Previous stories in this milieu include "Suffer the Children" (April 1988) and "With Twoclicks Watching" (January 1993). A S'hudonni novel is forthcoming from Wildside Press.

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Chapter One

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:

—William Blake

All I wanted was a safe landing. Our frightening, turbulent descent dropped us through towering anvils of lightning-racked storm clouds that shook and shoved our huge landing shuttle with violent bursts of wind as we dropped below sixty thousand feet and headed into our approach to Caledonia's sole landing strip.

The stomach-wrenching yaws and drops reminded me that we would be forced now to deal again with the vagaries of atmosphere after our months of calm confinement. Too tumbled about to read, I turned away from my book to look out the window, almost longing for the boring days of interminable nothingness that had marked the past half-year of travel aboard the S'hudonni freighter.

Week followed blank week there in the Earth Environment Bulb. I'd intended to use the time to finish one collection of poetry and start another, but the hours weighed so heavily that I accomplished precious little work beyond writing in my journal.

Instead, I drifted into a kind of permanent daze that helped the time go by. My daily routine included leisurely meals and long rambling walks in the simulator, working my way through a variety of realities: from miles of seacoast dunes to winding mountain paths to damp forest floors.

The one thing to break the monotony was a S'hudonni merchant prince who often came to visit. Twoclicks was a fat, Falstaffian character—all bonhomie and good will, but a practical joker, as well. He was, he said, interested in Earth and its cultures, and had read much of my poetry. He said, that first time, that he hoped I would find the time to converse about my work with him.

Find the time? Those rambling conversations with the effusive Twoclicks helped me keep my sanity during that monotonous voyage. Eventually a sort of friendship developed between us, one half-serious and half-mocking by turns. We talked about everything from the intricacies of American baseball in its golden era—How could he have known about Bobby Thompson? And why?—to the current glories of greater Mercantile S'hudon.

His friendship seemed strange at first, his motives impenetrable. Why did this wealthy member of the Earth's ruling class take such interest in me? The S'hudonni, god knows, were always looking for gain. What profit could I possibly bring?

They are such strange creatures, these S'hudonni. There was a time, in my youth, when I thought I knew them, understood them. I was, in my own way, famous for that understanding, wrong though I turned out to be.

Eventually I found they are truly unknowable, our mercantile masters; I learned that in the most difficult of ways, and so finally walked away from any knowledge, any relationships I'd built. Until my long passage on that freighter, I hadn't held a conversation with a S'hudonni in more than thirty years.

And now this particular one sought me out. There have been times when I would have gone screaming away from his presence and all that it reminded me of. But, decades pass, old horrors recede, and you get on with life, you accept things. That's part of growing old.

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And Twoclicks was better than most, to tell the truth. It was, perhaps, no more than our situation, hurtling along in close quarters through the darkness in the tiny, fragile environment, but he seemed genuinely interested in my thoughts on matters ranging from the political to the poetic. He thought the Scots' acceptance of limited independence at the turn of the last century had turned out to be a mistake, for instance. And, to my delight, he professed to love sestinas. Imagine a classic in that form, coming forth from that lispy, wide mouth, and you can appreciate my amazement.

Short and squat like all the S'hudonni, pasty-white and porpoise-shaped, with those stubby arms and legs and fragile fingers, the wide mouth, the small eyes buried in that rubbery flesh—he was no better looking than any of our masters. And he was full of their typically weird affectations, from his purposefully strange accent (the S'hudonni can speak any of our languages perfectly when they choose—I've heard them do it) to his love of Earthie soft drinks.

But his good humor and the way he treated me as an equal, as a friend, won me over. I was sorry to see him go on our last afternoon together. I was leaving the freighter for Caledonia along with the rest of the travelers from Earth, while Twoclicks was traveling on to mighty S'hudon itself, a voyage no Earthie had ever made, or was ever likely to. We parted warmly.

I had kept to myself, otherwise, making no friends and acquiring no enemies. The people aboard knew nothing of me, nothing of who I'd been and what I'd become, and that was all to the good. My only break in the routine was the time I'd spent chatting with Twoclicks and the week I spent in sickbay, mid-voyage, fighting a persistent cough and cold. The S'hudonni medcot seemed puzzled at first by whatever it was that had worked its way into my old, tired lungs, but eventually the cot puzzled it out, and I recovered, slowly, patiently regaining my strength, knowing that I had time in abundance.

Now, by contrast, we hurtled toward solid ground so quickly that I was stunned by our passage, could only stare out the window as the angry weather greeted us with amazing fury. We'd been warned about the storms back at the orbital outpost, where we'd left the freighter and met the landing shuttle. The warnings, of course, just made the actuality worse, with the expectation of danger heightening the nervousness. For most of its year, Caledonia's weather along its populated coastal plain was cool, wet, and calm. Only during these few summer months did the occasional storm rage, and this one was, we were told, a classic.

There was another worry we were told of, too. Once we landed we'd have to contend with domestic troubles in Leuchars, the colony's only city. Exactly what "domestic troubles" meant hadn't been made clear, but it didn't sound like a promising start for the colony's new batch of arrivals. Welcome to Earth's first colony, please take cover immediately.

At least we were comforted through the stormy ride toward all these troubles below by the knowledge that our shuttle, like all S'hudonni technology, was nearly magical in its abilities. The wings of the craft grew or contracted, thinned and thickened, to meet the pilot's needs as she contended with the thick well of atmosphere. Even S'hudonni technology, though, for all its advanced perfection, had to deal with nature now and again, and Caledonia seemed determined to prove that point as we fought our way down. There was, at least, a certain wry satisfaction in the way the struggle showed there were limits even for the mighty S'hudon. I hadn't encountered such limits often in my life.

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Our pilot flew the massive thing as though she were in a dogfight, dodging the worst of the storm cells and twice clicking into our comm system to apologize for her rough handling. She was one of us, oddly, an Earth emigrant now handling shuttle duties for the colony. Most days, that meant moving freight back and forth between the enormous orbital outpost and the colony. Once every three months, it meant passengers. The very fact that she wasn't S'hudonni showed how different things were out here on the fringes of the Empire.

Her second apology was worrisomely sincere, and followed a dazzling maneuver that stood us on our left wing as we swerved around a thick, black thunderhead that boiled with activity, gray-black cloud forming and swirling upward as I watched. My restraining device clamped my waist automatically as we banked, and I looked straight down the wing to the dark depths below with considerable awe and no small amount of fear, feeling the pressure of the belt against my hips as gravity tried to pop me loose from Seat 22A, Row Three, Lamb/Clifford, Earth/Caledonia, Return.

I am not a brave man, god knows I'd proven that in my past, so I was more than glad when the riotous ride finally eased a few minutes later as we dropped below the cloud deck. Then, as we flew beneath the storms, I watched as bright lightning streamers etched outward from explosive central flares. I'd never seen lightning quite like that, and it reminded me forcefully of the alienness of where I was. These were not the long, jagged bolts of Earth's electrical activity, these were Caledonia's expressions of power. Caledonia, Earth's first step toward the stars—the great, humiliating, wonderful, terrifying, humbling, inspiring, tantalizing gift from our S'hudonni benefactors. Caledonia, our grand experiment, *given* to us by our mercantile friends who rule the stars for profit.

We banked to skirt a final cell, and there, briefly, I could see in the distance the landing lights, seeking us through the storm. We straightened out and dead-arrowed for their glimmer, our target in sight.

I was excited to see that runway. I'd traveled here, as far from my past as any human could get, and in that traveling I'd moved from the pain of that awful past through a sleepy academic interregnum and now into something new, something fresh. That felt very good, indeed.

We bounced three times, the first time quite hard, as if we sought the solid ground too strongly. And then we were rolling toward the distant terminal building, our shuttle's landing lights mixing with the strip's to glint from the puddled surface of the tarmac. Lightning flashed over us, but now didn't seem so threatening.

We exited from the shuttle in a light drizzle. There were a good three hundred meters between our exit ramp and the open door of the pre-fab, one-story terminal building. I put my head down against the cool, light rain, and began walking, stepping gingerly around the deeper puddles.

The water reflected brightly with each blast of lightning, and one closer flare caused me to look up. We were in the eye of the storm system. In three directions, the thunderheads reached high, mountainous and menacing against a deep blue-black late evening sky. Toward the east, Arran, Caledonia's famous red-hued moon, was full in a broadening patch of clear sky, and from its light the storm clouds took their shape. The clouds sailed west. In an hour, I guessed, the rain might be done.

Another crack of energy brought me back to the task at hand. I hustled with the other two hundred people toward the terminal building. I didn't

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mind getting wet, enjoyed it even, after the long months of weatherless, featureless boredom aboard the bulb of that S'hudonni freighter; but being struck by lightning was surely an encounter with nature more intimate than necessary. I smiled at that thought, and scrambled with the others toward that single large arrival building.

There, a tall, florid man wearing a rumpled gray suit stood behind a podium and apologized to us for "The unfortunate delay you're facing."

He never did introduce himself, a jittery functionary whose plans for the day had been sent spinning by the "troubles" in Leuchars. "Landing Day is our major national holiday," he explained. "It commemorates our first landing here twenty-seven years ago. In the past, it has been a time of festivities and celebrations and pride, pride in what we've done here."

He paused, nervous, "In recent years, however, particularly last year and now this year, certain," he paused again, wiped his brow with an embarrassingly pink handkerchief, "certain elements of our society have begun using Landing Day to express, a bit violently at times, their discontent."

He stopped and looked over the crowd as if we were somehow to blame for all this. "No one has been seriously hurt—*yet*. But we felt you ought to know about the troubles in the city before you take your shuttle buses into the colonial arrival center. Buses *will* run. However, for those of you who want to spend the night here in the calm, if crowded"—and he had the nerve to smile benignly at us—"conditions of the terminal building, cots will be provided. There are showers, toilet facilities, and food enough for the night."

He rambled on, but I hardly heard him. The important news was Trouble in Paradise.

Well, I hadn't planned on being a war correspondent again. I had paid those dues, and paid them dearly, forty years before. Now I thought of myself, quite contentedly, as a teacher in semi-retirement and a poet of some small reputation—not, by god, a gung-ho journalist out to save the world . . . especially *this* world.

On the other hand, I told myself, when I accepted this two-year teaching appointment, I had figured that understanding and accepting the people and the places of the island continent of Caledonia would be an important part, the most revitalizing part, of my teaching and writing. And part of me, too, was still that journalist who'd seen the Conflict rage and flare and die nearly a half-century before.

I sighed, and began edging toward the door where the luggage was stacked, meaning to grab my bags and find the first bus into the city. It would be a confusing first night, that seemed certain, but one does what one must, sometimes. God knows that was a lesson I'd learned over the years.

A hand on my shoulder stopped me. "Mr. Lamb?" A tall, thin young man, wearing glasses, maybe twenty-five years old, stood there. "Mr. Lamb? Clifford Lamb?"

I nodded.

"My name is Paul Seals, sir. I'm with *The Observer*. I've been sent to do a story on your arrival. I'll be happy to take you into city center in my runabout, and maybe we can talk on the way."

Well, Seals was a godsend: free transportation and a font of knowledge all rolled into one lanky form. I quickly discovered, as we found my bags and headed toward the small parking lot in front of the main building, that he was a nice enough fellow, earnest to a fault, though clearly not happy at all about the position he was in.

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I was sure that he would have preferred covering the uproar in the city to meeting a visiting retired politician and minor poet from Earth. I smiled at that humbling thought. In our small literary circle on the home world, I had something of a name from my past and a bit of a reputation for my writing. Here, of course, I would be completely unknown.

"I'm sure you'd rather be covering the action in the city," I told him wryly as we loaded the bags into the trunk of his car and then climbed into the front seats.

He laughed, nodded. "But at least you really showed up. Six months ago we received the message that you'd be coming, but we didn't know exactly when. If you hadn't been on this shuttle, the evening would have been a complete waste."

Though he meant the conversation to be an interview of me, Seals was the talkative sort. As he steered us through the shallow glens that angled in toward the city and its bay, I did most of the listening.

The current troubles headed his list of topics. "Riot, I guess, is too strong a word for them," Seals said, "but there is a lot of pushing and shoving and yelling back and forth between the older colonists and the first-borns."

"First-borns?"

"They're the ones—I'm one of them—who were born on Caledonia. They want changes in the way things are done; secret ballot elections, no restrictions on *The Observer,* fairer treatment of the Anpics, things like that."

The Anpics are the indigenous tribes. Like everyone else on Earth, I'd read about them. "I thought the Anpics were left unchanged. Wasn't that part of the original agreement with the S'hudonni when the colony was started?"

"Well, yes, but it hasn't worked out quite that way. Most of the first-borns think the Anpic population has been decimated by the changes we've made here. There never were very many of them, you know, and as we've spread out, those relative few have been forced to change tribal patterns that go back, well, thousands of years at least, I suppose."

"And the older colonists aren't worried about that?"

"Oh, they're worried, or claim to be. But all they ever want to do is study the problem. And then they seem to be figuring out ways for the Anpics to accommodate us rather than having us back away."

He'd been getting angry, just talking about it, but then he eased back in his seat and calmed. "At least that's how the first-borns look at it."

"I can see which side you're on."

"I'm a journalist," he said, running his hand through his full mop of red hair. He intended that to be his full answer, as if it proclaimed a convincing neutrality.

I said nothing in response.

"Look," he said, after a long minute of silence. "I have my sympathies, sure, but I cover it straight, like we all do at *The Observer*. There's only a dozen of us working at the paper, and we're evenly divided between first-borns and older colonists. We all get along just fine by staying outside of the arguments. We cover it straight up, that's all."

I nodded. I'd played it that way myself, a long time ago. It hadn't done me much good. I could only hope, for Seals's sake, that his efforts had happier results and less deadly consequences than mine. I almost said something, tried to use my past to warn him of his possible future. But I hadn't talked about those years in a very long time, and I found I couldn't here, either.

It was a half-hour drive into the outskirts of Leuchars. By the time we got

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there, my worries about the troubles had eased. The streets were quiet, and Seals clearly expected no serious problems. His electric runabout even had a sign on each side that read *The Observer*. He laughingly called that "Protective. Maybe. Not everybody likes the paper, you know. The sign might just make us a target."

Then he added, rather wistfully, "There might be a little action, but it's doubtful. We're not used to violence here; we've never had any, really, and I think everyone is shying away from even the possibility."

It certainly looked that way. Leuchars was not a pretty city at first glance. Here on the outskirts, the prefab and hastily built stone-and-wood homes and shops looked as though they hadn't been there long and might not be there tomorrow; like coastal Florida had always looked to me before my life changed, before we tore the whole place down and let the S'hudonni rebuild it for us. Before I'd admitted my shame and then left it behind for a safer life in Scotland.

The wide streets appeared calm, though, nearly empty; and then things began to look more prosperous and permanent as we drove closer to the city center. The people walking the streets didn't look especially furtive or dangerous. It was late, nearly midnight local time, and there was no curfew in effect.

Seals even convinced me to go with him to a favorite local pub to continue our conversation and get started on the real interviewing. He was talking about the local ales, in fact, when we felt, as much as heard, a deep dull, thumping boom as he turned right to take a short cut.

"I wonder . . ." Seals said, and then fell silent as a long, low rumble followed the boom. He took two more quick turns, trying to get a fix on the direction of the sounds. There was a stalled car ahead, angled across the road so that we had to edge up and onto the sidewalk to get past it. From the rear, in the streetlights, the car looked fine, but as we pulled slowly by, I could see that the front fender was scorched; the paint had bubbled. The windshield was cracked into thousands of tiny fragments, held together only by their polymer bond. The headlights were blown out.

"Paul," I said stupidly, as if he couldn't see this for himself, "this car's been bombed. . . ."

. . . and then an explosion from the corner behind us lit up the night, flashing momentary light and stark shadows as it shattered storefront glass and violently rattled our little car.

I looked back. Dozens of people were rounding the corner and running toward us, bloody, panicked by the explosion. They'd been marching when the bomb went off along their route, and now they were fleeing for their very lives, afraid there would be more bomb attacks at any moment.

The scene reminded me a lot of what I'd left behind all those years before in the States, before I'd left for Britain and my years of quiet hibernation. Back then, back home in the States, was when it had all fallen apart on me. I had watched, safe, as friends died, as a nation died. That was when my memories were made. Everything I'd been since, the teaching, the plays, the poetry—they all began there, a reaction to that terrible time.

Seals pulled the runabout thirty meters or so farther on and parked it. He killed the engine, opened his door, grabbed his camera from the back seat, and tried explaining things to me all at once.

I got the idea. My news value was in rapid decline and he was getting his wish for some action.

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I could see the excitement in his face, and decided to watch him work, getting out to follow him back up the road. I stayed behind him as he walked along, talking to people and rapidly taking pictures. The crowd had slowed in its flight as no more bombs exploded. They were young, first-borns no doubt, and their fear was turning quickly to anger. I heard them talking about how the bombs proved what kind of people they had to deal with.

I talked briefly with one of them, a chubby, anxious young man in a light blue jacket with the letters UL stenciled across the front. "That car there," he said, pointing to the scorched vehicle we'd driven carefully by, "was just driving along when someone threw a bomb. There was this big splash of flame, and then the driver managed to pull it over. She got out, I saw her running. And then your car came out of that street and turned to go by it, and we thought you'd get bombed, too, but then you didn't and we started walking that way and then that big bomb blew out that drugstore right back there and . . ."

The fellow was near panic, rambling, but the general information seemed clear. A peaceful march had gone terribly wrong here, and might get worse at any moment. Seals was inside a pub that sat across the street, The Canny Man, talking to people in there who'd seen the action. He'd waved at me to join him a few minutes before and then gone into the place. I headed that way to tell him what little I'd learned.

And I saw something, someone, a fleeting glimpse of a man, running down the side alley next to the pub, through it, and into the street beyond.

"Hey," I yelled, and raised my hand to point at him. He'd been standing over a rubbish bin, dropping something into it. "Hey, stop!"

As if that would stop him. As if I, a tired old man, could stop anything.

Once, a long time ago, I had the chance to stop someone. All it took was action, a simple request to cease, to stop, to end it. But I couldn't, I didn't, act. Filled with a deadly self-assurance, a confidence that never failed me, I led that famous march and rally.

I'd been lucky in my life. No, Lucky—capitalized. A television reporter in Punta Gorda, Florida, a one-man bureau for WINK-TV in Ft. Myers to the south; I wrote the copy, got the camera ready on its tripod, did the stand-up, edited the tape, and drove it to the station to get it on the air.

Shuffleboard tournaments, city council meetings, auto accidents, stormy weather or tourists-in-the-sunshine stories—I did them all, every day, hoping for the break that would get me to Ft. Myers and then, my wildest dream, up to Tampa, where the big stations were.

Then came Landing Day, the cushiony soft bottom of the shallow Gulf of Mexico perfect for the S'hudonni's big freighters, and soon after, so much like home for the S'hudonni themselves, creatures of that warm, shallow waterworld we now hear so much of, mighty S'hudon itself.

There were turtles on the beach that night, laying eggs in newly dug nests. I was there, taping the mother as she struggled up the beach, flailed away with her back flippers, and then began dropping soft, wet gray eggs by ones and twos—dozens of them, plopping into the sand and then stickily onto each other. I was mesmerized by this process, focusing tightly on it, the mother undisturbed by my lights, when a distant roar began and then dopplered higher and louder and louder still as it came toward me before suddenly going silent—total mind-numbing volume to eerily quiet in an instant.

I looked out to sea and there sat a screamship, a great white whale of a

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thing floating there calmly. And then came another, roaring into silence, and another, and then the freighters, lowering spindly legs into the shallow seas, until there were a dozen ships there.

And me. With my camera and my videotape and my perfect hair and smile that I'd worked on in front of the mirror, perfecting my technique.

When that first S'hudonni emerged, I was there, at the front of the growing crowd of stunned spectators. I was there. Brian Hamilton was my name then, and I was the one who the first S'hudonni spoke to in that strangely perfect English. My career was made. I had access thereafter, and played my role well, quickly making pasty-white porpoise-shaped friends in the highest of places.

A month later I was in New York, six months later I had my own show, *Brian Hamilton's World*. A year later, I had unspendable wealth and power beyond imagining.

And then, during the Reorganization, reality set in. Grain farms for S'hudon's alcohol, some necessary changes in the way we led our lives, some new rules and regulations, a new way of seeing ourselves. . . .

I rebelled. No, to be more honest I complained. Certainly no American was in a better, safer position to do so. I raised my objections in front of my weekly audience of seventy million. I brought my S'hudonni contacts onto my show to answer my tough questions and expressed my anger when the responses didn't satisfy me.

Such power blinds you. I called for boycotts, for action in the streets. I sought change, safe in my black Manhattan tower as I told the nation what to think of all this, what to say and do, how to act.

I knew so much, you see. So damn much.

And it all came down to that day back in Punta Gorda, on Pass-a-grille beach. A year had passed. The turtles were back, laying eggs in the summer heat. Thunder rumbled from inland storms that would drift our way on the hot night's breezes.

My crew and I taped it all as the delegation made demands. Think of that: *they made demands.* Of the S'hudonni! And I *let* them, knowing what might happen, what *would* happen, but thinking more of its impact on my share of the audience than of anything else.

They had planted a stolen device of S'hudon's on the leg of a freighter. Very low tech to get it there, a lone swimmer, no metal, no electronics. A demonstration, prompted by frustration. A small charge, one they thought might make S'hudon pay some attention.

It blew with a soft concussive whoomp and in a terrible slow motion the leg slowly buckled and the freighter slid into the soft sand bottom. No S'hudonni lives were lost. None. Even the simple technology they bring for use on a frontier world shields them utterly from such simple violence.

But those screamships—my, how they roared! Three of them, then six more, then six more again. We'd thought that there were no more than five for all of Earth, and that demonstrations timed for elsewhere would keep them busy.

And I had thought that my presence, the presence of Brian Hamilton, the Earthie they trusted, the Earthie they shared soft-drinks with, the one who knew their private lives, their secrets, their little jokes, would protect us all.

I was so terribly wrong. Two hundred or so died in that first burst of power, a brief glimmer of light, a subtle brightening of a path from ship to target, and then there was death, furious and shattering, heat so intense that

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those around me simply burst into flames, erupted into glorious balls of white, rising heat that flickered quickly to blue, then to yellow, then to no more than smoke, drifting away on the breeze, out to sea.

Oh, Christ. I stood there, afraid at first to die, then terrified I might not. I stretched out my arms to the heavens, I begged for death as hundreds around me died.

Finally, in answer to my prayers, a column of light, a terrible marching, moving vortex of heat and death, came my way, inched toward me, threw me to the sand with a ferocious blast of energy. And then moved on, leaving me there, all too alive.

So I ran. While others around me died, I ran, pushing and shoving my way through the very people who'd come there as my followers. I could hardly see them, and I paid them no mind at all, I was far too busy running in panic from the death I'd brought there.

They knew me, of course, they'd all seen me on dozens, hundreds, of broadcasts. Too stricken themselves to see the fear in me, they crowded around me as I tried to flee. They begged me for help.

Oh, god. I heard that awful scream from above as we milled helplessly around, sheep about to die. I heard that scream and looked up and there, above us, hovered one of those awful ships.

I fell to my knees in terror. I cried. I begged that deadly alien thing to let me live. To let *me* live, no matter what happened to the others.

And when the flames died down and the butchery stopped, I was alive. And the cameras around me had taped every moment of it.

Those tapes were seen globally within the hour. It was the highest audience share I'd ever grabbed, by a factor of a hundred or more. Billions watched—and learned.

And I fled. I had money, god knew, and time. I thought, given those two, that I'd somehow emerge from my horror, find a new life, a new name. Change myself, renew myself, somehow earn back the debt I'd incurred. I had killed those people by the dozens, as surely as if I'd ordered those searing blasts myself.

I felt dead. That me *was* dead. I quit the show, quit the country, traveled, learned my new name and who it was I'd become. Clifford Lamb, an academic. A quiet man. A *poet,* by god—one with a shattered arm, pieces of that burnt sand imbedded so deeply into me that forty years later it was still there, occasional grains of it emerging from time to time to remind me of what I was and what I did and did not do.

And now this, all of it back again for me, as if my cowardice was something that had happened only a month or two back, not thirty-five years ago. Hesitantly, fearfully, I cried out to that running figure.

And he stopped. I was halfway across the street when I saw him hesitate at the end of the short alley, no more than thirty meters from me. He turned to look back. He waved at me, a warning, as if to push me away, before turning and running quickly around the far corner and out of sight.

I had only started to turn back when the bomb he must have planted in the garbage can blew with a loud whoomph of concussion that sent me tumbling back and down onto the street at the curb. I saw the explosion in weird slow-motion time, saw the rubbish bin expand and disappear into an orange-red flame that grew toward me. Somehow I had the sense to drop down low and duck behind a stone bench before the shock wave could catch

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me, and even then, with some of its force broken by the bench, the shock flung me hard against the stone wall behind me.

There was a dizzying moment, as I lay there, when I thought that surely I must be dying. But, as my senses returned, I realized that I wasn't badly hurt. So I stood, and was dusting myself off when others, Paul Seals among the first of them, reached me.

"My god, Lamb! I thought for sure that you'd been killed! I can't believe it. Bombs. *Here.* And *you.* My god, what if . . ."

I waved his concern away. Truth was, I didn't feel that bad. I felt exhilarated, really. The past few minutes had gotten my tired old adrenal glands working again, waking me up.

"I'm all right, Paul, really. The concussion just knocked me down, that's all. I don't think any of the debris got to me at all. I got behind that bench there, and then was just awfully lucky, I suppose."

"Well," he said, smiling, "not all *that* lucky." And he pointed toward my left leg, where a jagged piece of metal was jammed into the thigh. Blood soaked my pants, but there was no spurting, so this wouldn't likely kill me where I stood. Funny that I hadn't noticed it and had felt no pain until Seals showed me the wound. "Damn," I said, and immediately felt faint. I sat down on the curb. Sirens were wailing now in the distance. Help would be here soon.

"I think we should just leave it in there for now," Seals was saying, and then he was saying else, something about violence and bombs and Leuchars and the first-borns. He was rambling on, but I barely heard him for the roaring in my ears. The night-time view of the streets was curiously narrowing, and then, slow fade, there was darkness.

Chapter Two

My stay in the infirmary was mercifully short. The surgeon who cleaned out the wound and stitched me up said I'd been lucky, the shrapnel missed the femoral artery by a centimeter or I might have bled to death before the emergency crews could get to me.

There was no S'hudonni medcot here, of course, they don't easily part with that level of technology. Instead, the surgeon's work was his own. But his stitching inside and out went well; he thought I'd spend no more than a week in bed recovering, given my age.

In two days, I felt healed. In three days, the stitches were out and so was I, free to go, taking with me the smile of the surgeon, proud of his work. To my own amazement, I felt surprisingly good, given what I'd been through. The other bumps and bruises of that night had healed quickly, and the few days in the infirmary had gone by in a blur, with visits from Seals and his sister Pauline and her friend Janice.

To my surprise, I was a celebrity in Leuchars. Not only was I the first writer of any reputation to visit the colony in more than a decade, I was, to them, a famous Earth poet. One of my thin collections of poems, it seemed, was taught in the school system here, along with the likes of MacCaig and Eliot and Yeats and Tennyson.

Everyone had great plans for me during my visit. Everyone wanted to help me get over my wounds and get on with my work here, my teaching, and, especially, the writing of the expected new volume of poetry based on the delights of Caledonia.

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Things had been calm since that explosive night. The bombings of Landing Day, the injured people and shattered buildings, had frightened both sides into a kind of shocked cease-fire. They weren't used to this kind of violence and everyone seemed to think it was over, as a result. I hoped they were right.

But I had my doubts. In my too-long life, I had seen any number of these moments of calm, some of them years long. None of them had lasted.

I had even fooled myself, in fact, into thinking that this last long stretch in my life would last, untroubled: calm, academic, and serene, with a slow accumulation of reputation as a poet. I'd earned my peace, I thought. And now this.

As I left the infirmary with Paul Seals, I rubbed my left arm, thinking of what the surgeon said. "This has always been a quiet place," he murmured as he checked on me and marveled at my recovery. "I don't understand, it's always been nice and calm."

Calm. I smiled at that. I thought *I'd* earned a certain calm, but the pressures here were moving things toward violence. I had no idea why, any more than these people, these good people, understood the horror of what they'd have to face. They thought it was over, a spasm of terror that was past now, not to come again. I hoped it was so, I truly did.

The Governor General of Leuchars, apologetic to a fault about what she said her city had done to me, paid a visit the morning before I left the infirmary. When she heard that I was being released early, she invited me to dinner that evening at Government House. "It will be a quiet little gathering, Mr. Lamb, just five or six of us, nothing too taxing, I promise."

Feeling energetic, I agreed, though as soon as I left the infirmary with Seals and we drove to his house, where I was staying in a small guest room, I began to have second thoughts. Still, this strange energy wouldn't last forever, I guessed, and I might as well take advantage of it. By mid-afternoon, I was out for a long walk that should, if my planning worked out, end with my arriving at Government House in time for the Governor General's "little gathering."

The walk was wonderful. Sometimes what you touch tells you more than what you see. Walking the streets of Leuchars was like that for me. Feeling the pavement beneath my feet and reaching out to touch the grass of that alien place showed me more of it in a two-hour stroll than days of viewing out of a hospital window or looking at it through Seals's car window might have.

I rambled from residential areas through the business district and from there into a small series of parks that ringed the city. It was possible, using those parks, to walk completely around the city center in woods and parkland the entire time, always within a half-kilometer or so radius from Government House, the political heart of Caledonia, built atop the hill that centered the park.

The park's foliage was a mixture of local plants and genetically tweaked Earth imports, courtesy of the S'hudonni. Broad-leafed low bushes adorned with cottony balls of bright red flowers that launched themselves at me as I passed vied with beds of forsythia and roses for my attention.

The afternoon darkened as I walked. At first I thought the thickening weather was a local fog rolling in from the docks where the New Tay River emptied into the mouth of Leuchars Bay. But the weather proved it was more than a mist by spitting gusty rain at me and forcing me from the park.

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I sought shelter in a small café on a side street near the city's central square.

The rain reminded me of home. The runoff rushing through the gutters and spilling out onto the street looked and sounded the same. The rain even tasted the same as it ran off my soaked cap and into my eyes and mouth. Once inside, drying out, I sat and sipped on hothouse grown coffee of which the café's owner was justifiably proud.

"Best coffee in the entire city," he boasted as he poured me a refill. "It's all in the details, you see. The right beans, tended just so. Then the drier for them, then the right grind, the right filters, good water. You have to do these things right every time for a good cup. Every time."

He was right, it *was* in the details, and the coffee was delicious, a perfect counterpoint to the blowing rain I could see rippling across the street outside. For that dizzying moment it looked just like home.

Twenty-seven years I'd spent in Edinburgh, twenty-seven good years recovering and reviving and learning how to live a quieter life. Sheltered in the Dean Village, a quiet little group of homes hidden away in a small gorge in the middle of urban Edinburgh, I'd lived and worked. I had friends there, good ones. They held the typical Scot's cold sympathy for what S'hudon had done to my own country: the enormous grain farms everywhere busy in the first stage of producing S'hudon's alcohol; the crowded, gleaming perfection of the four S'hudonni port cities with their rings of shantytowns; the shock and pain of economic collapse that led to S'hudon's Reconstruction of once-America.

The Scots and the rest of the British had benefited enormously from the S'hudonni arrival, forging their New Empire, working at the behest of the new lords of the country manor that Earth seemed to be to the S'hudonni, their private garden where we labored busily, incongruously raising grains for them. So my friends' sympathy was muted; they were sorry for the poor cousin across the sea, certainly, but not *too* sorry. We'd earned it, in their minds, by trying to alter the inevitable back in those early days. Such hubris, to think ourselves capable of warring with the gods.

I had warred with the gods, and lost. But there was no way to revive the dead. There was no honor to be earned that could remove those stains. I had thought to change the world. Instead . . .

But life goes on. Eventually, I'd drifted to Edinburgh and the calm, studied life that slowly emerged. I could never atone for what I'd done, true enough; but I could teach, and care, and help my students one by one. I didn't know how to survive any other way.

That was all long ago. Now I sat in a perfect faux café in a perfect faux Scots city on a world hidden by distance and technology from Earth. No astronomer peering into the heavens had the vaguest idea where Caledonia was located. The S'hudonni had found the planet, and, for their own reasons, prepared it in ways beyond our knowing, and brought us here, the planet ready for our occupation. And here I sat, sipping coffee, marveling that life could take me from that broken past to this strange present.

I shook my head, remembering. I sipped the coffee while the rain slapped against the window. Finally, as I watched, it eased off, and I finished my second cup, thanked the man and paid him, and walked back onto the street.

Leuchars seemed older and larger than it had a right to be. There couldn't

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be more than thirty thousand people here, and yet somehow it gave the impression of being a much larger city than that. It wasn't as old as it looked, either. The stains of past rains that discolored the sides of the buildings, the worn stone steps of the houses and shops, the general feel of age that permeated this place—all of that gave Leuchars the feel of a city hundreds of years old, instead of one nearly new.

But as I walked along, it slowly began to make sense to me. Twenty-five years was time enough for soft stone to wear from heavy use and for frequent rain to leave a permanent trace of itself upon the sides of buildings. There had been time enough, in those twenty-five years, for these people, like their buildings, to come to look as if they *belonged* here; time enough for them to have developed their own sense of destiny, their own history.

The very name of the place held clues. The Leuchars in Scotland after which this place was named was a small, transitional town, a train station near an abandoned air base. From Leuchars, you can take the bus or a taxi to St. Andrews, or change trains to make your way to Dundee or Perth. Otherwise, the place is of no consequence.

Just outside of that original Leuchars, a few miles away on the coast, half buried in the turf, lies the bottom row of stones from what was, more than two thousand years ago, a Roman fort. Visited by the Emperor, Septimius Severus himself at the height of his power, the fort marked the very edge of the Empire, looking out over St. Andrews Bay toward the distant Grampian mountains and the naked blue Picts who lived there.

I thought of that as I walked a sodden gravel path through a murky afternoon. The edge of empire. A place for transitions. Wasn't that why I had come here to the edge of this empire, for my own transition, some final change in a life that had seen too much, done too little, caused too much harm?

I'd thought to find a calm peace here for my own final act, a place where I could teach and write into my decline.

Instead, I'd stumbled into this explosive ferment. How could they do this to one another? How could feelings that deep, hate so strong that lives were threatened, have emerged here in such a tight-knit, isolated community? I was no sociologist, no psychologist. I was, instead, just a tired old poet; and I didn't have the answer.

The birds of Earth migrate by ultrasound, marking their paths by the resonations of a distant sea, harmonizing with it as they move toward food and safety.

Just such a resonance connected this city to the ships of S'hudon. I heard and felt nothing at first. But heads tilted, and the people around me in the park clearly heard. They *felt*.

Then I, too, felt a distant rumble, a low vibration, something calling. God, I knew that sound. It had been nearly half a century since I'd felt it in my bones like that, but I knew, I knew.

I followed the crowd. What had been a few dozen people became hundreds and then a thousand or more as we gathered around a small hill in the center of the park. No one moved onto the hill itself, we all simply gathered and waited.

There were young and old there, looking up, scanning the sky, saying nothing for a change, just watching and waiting.

I didn't break into the moment to ask anyone what was happening. In-

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stead, I looked up, like them, shading my eyes against a thin sun that broke through the clouds. And then there came a great roar from the crowd, and I saw in the fading gray of the clouds a high white enormity, slowly descending. A screamship. The gathered crowd burst into cheers.

And I understood. For these people, everything they had was the result of such ships. For the humans here, their culture, their very lives, depended on the arrival of ships such as these. The screamships were their lifeline to their great protectors, their benefactors, the S'hudonni.

The ship flew over our heads once, just above the thin, scattered clouds so that I could see its shadow through the clouds, pale and gray as it passed.

Then it came down beneath the cloud layer and began to settle, as white and gleaming and perfect as that ship I'd seen years before. It somehow looked warm, even from a distance. And it looked powerful, too.

It hovered for a moment, pausing a few hundred feet above us, its wings extended for atmosphere. There was no high, angry scream, no great roar of engines balancing thrust against gravity; none of that famous intimidation. Just that deep rumbling and that huge shape settling down above the hill.

A few long minutes passed, and then a door irised open from a spot on the side of the hull. A figure emerged onto a walkway that slid forth—a S'hudonni, porpoise-shaped, whitely pale, standing on those stubby legs. They are not a pretty people, our lords and benefactors.

He looked over the crowd, raised one frail arm in a barely perceptible wave, and there was an audible sigh of appreciation from the crowd. On Earth, the S'hudonni wear personal shields, their thin glow a reminder of who's in control and who isn't. Here, on a world they created for their Earthie friends, there was no shimmering protection despite the recent violence. First-borns and colonials might try to kill each other, but neither group would ever threaten the S'hudonni, their lifeline.

Several dignitaries mounted the ramp of the screamship, shook hands with the agent. They, too, then waved to the crowd before the entire troupe came down through handshakes and smiles to disappear into a pair of limousines—I wondered what it had cost to ship *those* from Earth! The ship, safely impenetrable in its perfection, sat behind to wait.

I looked around. An older colonist smiled at me, and said "Usually just once a year they come, but now this is the third time in the past six months. Something, isn't it, the power of those things? And what they've done for us. It's just something!"

I shook my head and began walking away, thinking of what mighty S'hudon has done to us all in its search for harmony and profit. Out here, on the fringe of the empire, their power impressed all the more. As I walked along, the rain returned; a brief, cold shower that spit at me as I struggled in the sudden wind to snap my jacket shut.

I heard a car behind me, turned to see one of the limousines. It stopped, a door opened. There was a giggle. It was Twoclicks.

"Mr. Lamb, that wass good, wassn't it? Just like your film about Earth standing still. 'Klaatu barada nikto, 'yess?"

"Twoclicks! I'm amazed, and pleased, to see you! I had no idea that it was you getting out of that screamship. Weren't you continuing on to S'hudon?"

"Planss changed," he said in that sibilant whisper of theirs. "Here, watch." And he pointed toward his ship. "Gort," he said, "Marana kooa."

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The ship's ramp withdrew inside, and a vertical hatch closed smoothly after it. "I made that up," he said, barely containing his merriment. "Iss good, yess?"

"Yes, Twoclicks, it's very funny. I don't suspect most of the people here have seen that old movie, though."

"Really? You ssaid on the ship that it wass a classic. You lied?"

"No, it's a classic, surely, of a kind. It's just rather obscure, I'm afraid."

"Ah," he said. "Obscure. Well, no matter, much of life is obscure, yess? Pleasss come ssit down in comfort, Mr. Lamb. We have much to talk about once again, the two of uss."

"I was walking to a dinner at Government House. I suppose that's canceled now, with your surprise arrival."

"Oh, no, Mr. Lamb, iss very important that you be there. Iss important matterss to discuss."

"Important matters?"

"Yess, but that iss for later. Now, jusst relax. Let uss talk, Mr. Lamb, as we did on the ship. Tell me again of your favorite poetss. Let's say, American, nineteenth century. Whitman, no doubt, yess?"

"Well, yes, him certainly. But Dickinson, too, and perhaps Crane. Have you read Crane's poetry, Twoclicks? Very, very interesting work. Listen," and I recited a favorite from Crane, "A man feared that he might find an assassin;/Another that he might find a victim./ One was more wise than the other."

"Ah, yess, iss very, very good," said Twoclicks. "Iss from 'Black Riders,' yess?"

"Yes," I said, and shook my head. His knowledge was amazing.

And so we contented ourselves with conversation as the limousine drove toward Government House. It was like old times, discussing poets and politics for those thirty minutes or more as the car slowly worked its way through the crowds that surrounded us. Then we arrived, were escorted from the limousine into a large dining room, and the calm times began to end.

Chapter Three

In what distant deeps or skies,
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire,
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

—William Blake, "The Tyger"

The governor general was chatting with her assistant, the slick too-smiley character I'd met at the hospital when the two of them paid me the visit that led to this invitation. Bailey, the assistant, was speaking heatedly as we approached, his face contorted in anger—something had him terribly upset.

But that all changed, night into day, as he saw us. His face immediately brightened into a wide smile and he jovially stretched out his hand to meet mine. "Mr. Lamb, we're so glad you could make it. And Consul General Twoclicks," he added with a slight bow, "we are honored, as always, by your presence."

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Twoclicks ignored him, and spoke instead to the Governor General. "Madam, these troubless are sso unfortunate."

"We are doing what we can, Twoclicks," she said with a tired smile. "I, for one, think it's a matter of communication, or lack of it. The two sides just won't talk to each other."

"Except through *The Observer,*" said Bailey. "And since we have no control whatsoever over what's printed in that paper there's no telling how heated things may get. It's really a very threatening situation."

"But at least in *The Observer* the two sides are talking about the issues," said the Governor General, turning to look at her chief aide.

"More like they're shouting," said Bailey, then, seeing his boss' expression as she eyed him, "but, yes, they are," he hesitated, "as you say, communicating."

Twoclicks raised his hand and the two fell silent. "Freedom of press wass *your* idea, you humans, when we first began this colonization. We found it a curious concept even then, to allow such criticism. Hass it failed? Do you wish it to end?"

The question struck me as an explosive one. Standing there as an uncomfortable observer, watching the obvious conflict between the Governor General and her Lieutenant Governor and mixing it in with my personal liking for Paul Seals and his hard-working *Observer* colleagues, I could sense that great things suddenly hung in the balance here. Twoclicks had posed a question that came to the heart of Caledonia's existence. If the colony's leadership admitted that its free-press ideals weren't working, it would also be making a tacit request for S'hudonni help in stopping the current troubles before they got worse. So much for independence.

But if the leadership held ground and turned down Twoclicks' implied offer of help, then the current situation might tumble into serious, deadly violence. If that happened, surely the S'hudonni would have to step in anyway? It seemed so to me. I was happy I wasn't the one being asked the question.

The Governor General shook her head. "No, Twoclicks. We will solve this according to our constitution, and with our freedoms intact."

Bailey's face was a mask as the Governor General said that; a slight, tight smile his only expression. He clearly had other ideas.

"As you wissh, Madam," said Twoclicks, smiling that wide smile the S'hudonni can flash when they choose. "I wass only wondering."

The evening went on like that for two hours or more, polite conversation with a deadly undercurrent to it. Bailey, the Lieutenant Governor, was the one who seemed the most dangerous to me. He was, on the surface, a smiling and pleasant man, one concerned about Leuchars and the Troubles and anxious to find a way to, as he kept saying, "Just solve the problem."

But under that veneer was a calculated viciousness. Bailey had ambition, and power. It was a dangerous combination.

I said as much to Twoclicks as he drove me home to Seals's house later, in that expansive, ridiculous limousine.

"Yes, iss true, I think, Mr. Lamb. Bailey is the ssort who wishes for action. The Governor General, as you can ssee, is the ssort who wishes for things *not* to happen. Iss funny, really, yess?" And he chuckled.

"Funny, Twoclicks? I'm afraid I don't see the humor in it."

"Oh, Lamb, *iss* funny."

"If you say so."

He held up his small hands as if to slow me down. "I have a nice surprise. You would like to hear it?"

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"All right."

"Good. I undersstand you were involved in these troubless. There wass an explosion?"

"Yes. I wasn't badly hurt."

"It could have been sso much worse for you."

"Yes, I suppose so, it could have been. But I was lucky, I got out of the way of the worst of it, ducked behind a bench."

He smiled at me. "You moved well for a man of your age, Lamb. Did it all sseem to be in sslow motion as it happened? Did you sseem to have time enough to do what you needed to do?"

"Yes, yes, it did." What was he getting at?

"And you sseem very healthy now, very fit."

"Yes. I feel good, actually. I think the excitement, the changes, the travel: they've been good for me."

"Yess. Good for you."

We wheeled smoothly around a corner and headed toward Seals's house. The driver, without being told, clearly knew where we were going and how to get there.

Twoclicks turned to face me directly. "These difficultiess on Caledonia jusst now," he hesitated. "We are watching them. From among uss, different factionss are watching."

Oh, god, now he wanted to tell me of S'hudonni politics? Internal squabblings? Power struggles? No thank you.

"Twoclicks, I don't need to know about this."

"But you will lissten?"

I nodded. Just listening might be dangerous, of course, but no more so than *not* listening.

Twoclicks paused, thinking something through, it seemed. Then, "Lamb, I will go the heart of it. I have need of your help."

I laughed. "*My* help? You must be joking. What could *I* possibly do to help you? I am a tired old poet, Twoclicks. Remember how we talked about that, back on the ship?"

He'd actually been able to recite a poem of mine, a little thing about old empires. That and Shelley's "Ozymandias" were, he claimed, his favorite poems from Earth. I'd been flattered, and not believed him for a second.

"You are not so tired now, I think."

"Yes," I admitted again, "not so tired just now. I'll probably collapse in a few hours and sleep for a week. Look, Twoclicks, I don't know what you have in mind, but I don't really see how I could possibly be capable of helping you in any significant way."

Then I realized what he must mean. "Oh, you'd like something written, right? A speech perhaps, or an essay for the local paper? Yes, certainly, I can help you with that."

"No, nothing like that, Lamb. We have alwayss enjoyed what you write, but no, nothing like that, at all."

"What, then?"

"During your trip, during your illness on the freighter." He paused, waited. I could sense that he was getting a certain dark enjoyment from this conversation.

"Yes?"

"Certain enhancements were made in you. Changes. Devices were added, as part of your treatment."

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"You *did* something to me? Oh, Christ, Twoclicks, what . . ."

"*For* you, Lamb. These things, these devices, will help you, physically. They," he paused again, found the word, "repair what damage they find. They enhance where they can, within their limitss and yours."

"Enhance?"

He reached over with that short, frail arm and touched me with his fragile fingers. "I will sshow you, on this sspot on your arm. Ssee?"

He pushed up my sleeve, uncovering part of my left arm that showed the dirt from decades ago. He concentrated for a moment, smiled at me, said "Insstructions. I have contacted my ship, and it informs your devices, and thiss," he pointed to my arm, "iss the result."

I looked at my arm, and a patch the size of my thumb seemed to be clearing, *was* clearing, and then, in a few more seconds, was a pale white, my skin without its ground-in blemish.

"They do nothing but help you, Mr. Lamb. Your life will improve as long as they function."

He paused, seemed to be listening to something for a few seconds. "They have already cleaned certain plaques away, near your heart. There were polyps in the lower intestine, they are gone. Your muscle tone, it iss better. You are fasster, quicker. You are younger, Lamb, and can sstay that way."

"Oh, Christ," was all I could say. What had they done to me? Why?

He smiled broadly. "You are sshocked. We understand thiss. But you have lost nothing and gained all. And thiss is temporary. Another week or two and the devices corrupt. They collapse, are flushed away. You will again be as you were; aging, an old poet."

"Well, thank god for that!"

He laughed, a sharp bark of delight. "Yess, thank god for old poetss. You are a delight, Lamb."

Then he grew more serious. "Lamb. Understand this, we can enhance again, more permanently, more broadly. Your mental skillss. Your very bones and cartilage. Everything, anything. Your left arm, it could function fully once again."

"Perfect health?" I laughed. It was all some scam, of course, some elaborate joke from Twoclicks. The S'hudonni wield enormous power, no question, but they always have a reason, there is always a profit. Nothing is for free. "And what else, Twoclicks? Immortality?"

"Perhapss, in a way. A long, healthy life, at leasst."

"And what am I to do in return?"

"Soon," he said, "a crucial moment. A particular act."

"I didn't ask for this, Twoclicks. I don't want it. Take them away from me. Leave me be as I am, as I was. Please."

"It iss a very large empire, Lamb, with many who serve."

"It's not *my* empire, Twoclicks."

"Yes, it *iss*. You are here. *Earth* iss here. You are part of uss now."

We pulled up in front of Paul Seals's house.

"I will probably just disappoint you, Twoclicks, when this big moment comes. I take it you know my past."

"Your past. Yess, we know it." He motioned to the driver, who got out, walked around to my door, opened it for me.

I stepped out, looked back in to say, "I make no promises, Twoclicks. I'll be happy when your devices are done with me."

He just smiled, and the driver closed the door.

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Chapter Four

My Water of Leith runs through a double city;
A matter of regret.

—Norman MacCaig, "Double Life."

Two weeks later, I'd begun to think of it all as a false alarm. I felt better, yes, but I was no Superman. My knees still ached some in the mornings, my lower back twinged after my long, daily walks. Whatever it was that Twoclicks had given me, whatever those "devices" were, they hadn't affected me all that much.

Leuchars, too, suffered pain. The tension between the older colonials and the first-borns seemed to be rising each day, though there had been no more violence.

In my long walks, I could see it, feel it, the way the emotions were bottled up but threatening to break open. The way the two groups looked at each other on the street, the way they interacted in the shops; from my outsider's perspective, it looked as if the dam was surely going to burst.

Paul Seals and the other *Observer* staffers were increasingly blamed for much of the tension, especially by Bailey, the Lieutenant Governor. He even arranged for the Governor General's office to issue its own daily news-sheet, "In the interests of fairness," as he explained in the first issue's main story.

The new paper, along with *The Observer's* columns and heated letters to the editor, served as daily reminders to all of us that while the violence had receded, its source remained.

Driving back from a quick visit to *The Observer,* where I had agreed to meet with the editor-in-chief and discuss the issues, I tried to talk it over with Paul Seals, but he was unusually quiet. He'd received a death threat by e-mail, and while it wasn't the first, the cumulative effect was starting to take its toll on him.

Droplets of rain slid down my side window as Seals drove the last mile or so to his house. I'd come to really like the young journalist, as well as his sister and her friend, during the days I'd spent with them. Despite our differences in age, we got along well. They felt they could trust me to be fair, and so had begun asking my opinion on their current troubles. Were they right in assuming my fairness? I thought so. I hoped so. I hadn't told them of my conversation with Twoclicks.

I watched the raindrops angle down my window, merging occasionally with one another. The wind, the rain, and the motion of the car all conspired to move the drops along, pushing them off the glass, toward some sad little oblivion.

I didn't care for that image, frankly; it fell much too close to home. I sighed, shook my head to clear it of the bad omen I'd just invented for myself by watching silly drops of water on a glass, and looked past the remnants of the drop's trail to the neighborhood beyond as Seals pulled his car into the short gravel driveway.

His house was a small, one-story stone structure. A simple cottage, really, but it boasted a large front yard, covered spottily with that moss-like greenery they called grass here. There was one wonderfully large oak-like tree with huge, bright yellow leaves and a multitude of branches rising just at the edge of the yard. Its shade reached all the way to the house.

I planned on writing through the evening. The lull had given me time to

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consider my own poetry again, and the writing felt productive, focusing on the sights and sounds of this place first, since I understood its emotional values so little.

I brought out my portable screen and started scribbling. The screen had become almost a friend of mine in the year since I'd bought it. As it converted my handwriting into print, I was able to see both my script version of the poem and, at the same time, a good approximation of how it would look in print. The dual imagery, at first an annoyance to me, had become a necessary part of my writing, allowing me to sense the poem, to feel it, in more depth somehow, as if I still held it tightly and yet had sent it out into print at the same time.

Then, as I wrestled with a bad rhyme, trying for some useful enjambment that might save the thought, I heard the television broadcast from the adjoining room. It was the local station offering a special on what were now officially labeled the Troubles.

I set the poem aside—probably a wise thing to do in any event—and walked into the room. Seals, his sister, and her friend were there, watching, and I joined them.

It was disconcerting, seeing that televised version of what Paul and I had been through more than two weeks before. The images battled with my own recollections. Had there been that many people on the streets? Had the burned car given off such dark, oily smoke? Had the explosion that threw me down on the street done so much damage to the surrounding buildings?

Like the poetry I'd just been writing, it was two realities at once. I would have said no to all of those images, but there were the tapes in front of my eyes to prove me wrong. I was angry, watching the show, to think that technology was restructuring my remembered reality of events.

At one point, the news commentator, an older man with white hair, referred to suspicions by the authorities that the bombings were the work of the "First-borns and the chief instigator for their cause, local journalist Paul Seals."

"Oh, god," Paul moaned, "now that's the sort of reality you get when your government runs the television station. How in god's name did they come up with that? 'Chief instigator'? Good lord."

Pauline laughed nervously. "You always said you wanted to be a famous writer, Paul."

"Well, I *did* have a different sort of fame in mind, of course," he said with a smile.

Pauline brushed back her red hair. "Jokes aside, Paul, this could be dangerous. They're obviously setting you up for something."

"Yes," I added. "Be careful, this has made you a target. It's made all of you targets, in fact."

"Oh, I don't think there will be any more violence, Mr. Lamb," said Janice, Pauline's friend.

She was tall, only a few centimeters shorter than me, and athletic in build. Her brown hair was shoulder length. Her face was very pretty, high cheekbones, almost Asian eyes, and a delightful smile. Thirty years ago, I regularly fell in love with women like her.

"It's really hard to understand this violence. I'm sure it's not first-borns starting it, and it's hard to imagine the older colonials doing it either. We're their *children,* for god's sake! It just doesn't make any sense, all of this chaos over some disagreements on how to treat the Anpics."

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"Well, that's how it began," said Paul. "But it's getting a lot bigger than that now, Janice. I mean, we're into issues of free speech here, and a free press. We've had a representative democracy from the start, and now I think maybe we're heading toward a dictatorship. Those sort of things? They matter."

"Sad thing is, everyone's too damn confrontational right now for any common ground to be found," said Janice.

"There *is* no common ground between freedom and a dictatorship, and that's what Bailey, in particular, wants. He figures he can be a little king here, run his own little world while the S'hudonni sit and watch," said Paul.

"You think that's all S'hudon will do? Just watch?"

"Why not? Things will run along here smoothly enough. Hell, probably a lot smoother, to tell the truth. From the S'hudonni perspective, it probably makes great sense."

"Or as much sense as anything they do," added Janice. "I mean, we still don't know why we exist here as a colony, they've never explained that adequately, right?"

I nodded, and smiled. God knows, S'hudonni logic didn't always make sense. "Right. We know what they get from Earth, which serves as a kind of private garden and an alcohol producer. We don't know where those products go, though, or why. And we have no idea at all what Caledonia is all about."

"We know what we've learned in school, that Caledonia expands the empire, and it's a way station for shipping anyway, so it made sense to colonize, and since it's like Earth, we got to do the colonizing."

I shrugged. "All of that may well be true."

"Or not," said Paul. "But the S'hudonni aren't our immediate problem. Bailey and his friends are. And my point is that the S'hudonni aren't going to help us stop them."

"So you think there's nothing we can do and it's all going to explode again?" Pauline asked.

He shook his head. "I don't know. I'm not optimistic."

"Maybe you could help, Clifford," said Janice, looking at me. "The older colonials seem to like you, you're respected by the first-borns, and it's obvious the S'hudonni think highly of you."

I laughed. "Everyone seems to think a lot more highly of me than I deserve," I said. "No. I'm not your answer. I'm a teacher, and a middlin' good writer trying to write a few more decent poems before I die."

Janice looked at me almost crossly. "Why say something like that, Clifford? You're young enough, as writers go. There's no reason you won't be writing for years and years. My god, you're in terrific shape, you're obviously fit. If I didn't know better I'd say you were forty-five, not sixty-five."

Her flattery was enjoyable, and frightening. Did I really look younger? Could I be honest with myself about how I felt, physically? I could trust none of it, knowing it all might be the work of the engineers of S'hudon. Was I a falsehood? For the second time in my life, I could not trust myself. For the second time, I had no idea of my own reality.

Still, "Easy to say when you're young, Janice. No, I'll finish a final volume of new poems, spend my year here teaching in Leuchars, and then find some small island back on the home planet somewhere where I can spend my declining years in peace."

"I think maybe you're serious," she said.

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"I am, truly. I've earned the rest." Then I laughed. "Look, maybe I'm just tired and worn down right now, Janice. I came here expecting a quiet couple of years of teaching and writing. Instead, I come roaring down through a terrible storm, find myself wounded in a riot, and spend days in the infirmary, then find I'm being wooed as a diplomat of some sort. This isn't at all what I thought Caledonia would offer me."

She laughed. "I can promise you that things on Caledonia aren't normally so exciting."

Pauline agreed. "It's usually so quiet it will drive you crazy. If quiet contemplation is what you need, you'll find plenty of time for that here, I'm sure."

She leaned forward on the couch. "I'm sure the Troubles are over. They *have* to be over, and we can go back to talking about what to do rather than blowing each other up."

I liked Pauline. She was honest and open. She and her brother were clearly quite close, yet she wasn't afraid to differ with him. I hoped she was right, I hoped their troubles were over.

Eventually we talked ourselves out, getting nowhere, really. The day had been a long one, and tomorrow promised more of the same, so we finally all headed for bed.

I tossed and turned for awhile, restless, but then finally fell into sleep. In the pre-dawn darkness, I awoke in a fever, my shirt soaked in sweat, my hair damp, pulse racing.

There had been a dream. Explosions, pain, screaming—that awful time from my past, that time when I watched so many others suffer for believing in me. Someone had stared at me in the dream, watching me with a wide, patient smile. Twoclicks.

I couldn't recall more details, had spent far too many years learning to forget the minutiae of the horrible. A minute passed and I calmed. As my heart slowed, a breeze from the open window in the next room worked to cool the sweat. In a few minutes, I went from feverishly hot to chilled. I rose from my bed and walked into the living room to shut the window.

It was just before dawn. Arran had long since set, and I saw, through the glass, a neighborhood cloaked in shades of gray. A ground mist covered everything from waist height down, giving the stone homes and strange, wonderful, oakish trees a curiously ungrounded look, as if they were adrift on some gray sea.

It appealed to me, that sense of being adrift. Above the ground mist, the gray thinned, roofs and higher branches stood out in sharp, stark relief, all hard, dark ominous edges. Above them, the sky held the color of granite tinged with a faint, thin, precursing red.

I stared at the scene for a few minutes, taking it in, thinking that the ground fog might clear, for myself as well as for the day. I turned back to the couch, ready to try for more sleep.

I have always slept better in the mornings. The nights too often are troubled, images drift through unbidden and then slowly filter away. It has always been that way for me, as far back as I can remember—half-understood things that poked and prodded their way through my unconscious, turning themselves into parts of my dreams, leaving wispy remnants behind when I struggled up to consciousness.

I hated the night as a small child, often cried for my mother's help. I'd slowly come awake, still feeling the tendrils of some nightmare. The pillow

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would seem to harden to rock beneath my head, the darkness to hold a heavy burden of a thousand wild thoughts as I stared at the ceiling and cried.

Mother would offer comfort, and that would eventually lead to sleep. In the morning, things were always better, the surrounding huge dark sack full of unwanted dreams had emptied, and I would sleep, my thoughts again my own.

I sat on the living room couch. These were things I hadn't thought much about in years. Edinburgh, and work in a calm, confident society, had painted a veneer of order over all that had gone before. In Edinburgh, I had managed to put my past away, had convinced myself that this was a better me, the truer me. A poet, an artist and a teacher—not a hack journalist milking the misery of others for personal profit.

But now things were changing, moving like that ground mist out there, streaming in and around me again. I would have to try and keep my tired old head above it all.

A voice from behind me asked, in a surprised tone, "You're up this early?"

It was Janice, dressed in running shorts and shoes and an oversized sweatshirt with the letters UL across the front. Her dark brown hair was pulled plainly back behind her head into a short pony tail. She wore no makeup on those high cheekbones. She looked altogether American there for a moment—a vision from a past that was long gone.

"Bad dream," I admitted. "But I was just about to try for some more sleep after closing this window. Surely you're not going outside in that fog, and at this time of the morning?"

"I run every morning. I like the peace of it. And the ground mist isn't a problem. It's really not that thick, and the pavement is smooth."

"Well, have a good run. I'll probably take a good, long walk this afternoon. You can give me some advice on where to go."

"You like walking?"

I laughed. "You make it sound like exercise. Poets don't *exercise,* my dear, it's bad for the reputation. No, I just like to go for long rambles, five or six miles, enough to keep my weight under control. On the S'hudonni freighter, I went into a wonderful VR treadmill every day." I chuckled, "I knew it was the only chance I'd ever get to walk along the Great Wall or in the Outback."

She put her hands on her slim, runner's hips and stood in front of me in mock defiance. "Look, Clifford, why don't you just come with me now and do the real thing? You're already awake, it's a beautiful morning out, we can talk as we go, and there's nothing virtual about it—it's the real thing."

I groaned. "First thing in the morning? Heavens, Janice. I don't know if I'm capable of it. And I'd just slow you down terribly, to boot. No, some other time, perhaps."

"Clifford, we'll just go for a nice, slow ramble as you called it, then come back for some juice and coffee and a hot shower. It'll be wonderful. Come on along, all right?"

She reached down to grab my hands and tugged me up from the couch. "All right," I said, "all right, then. Let me put some shoes on, and off we go. But you'll have to be easy on me, agreed? Take your time for this tired old body?"

"Certainly," she said. "Nice and easy."

And, for a time, it was.

The mist, thicker than Janice had predicted, was a waist-high cloud that

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we plowed through, our feet all but hidden. Sunrise was still a few minutes away, and the false, gray pre-dawn light gave us just enough shadowy visibility to see our way.

I was a little stiff at first. I hadn't taken any time to loosen up before we started out and the pace was faster than I liked. But then, as we moved briskly along, I warmed up to it and began to enjoy myself, feeling the rhythm of the walk.

It was eerily silent, our shoes on the pavement the only sound to mar the mist-dampened morning. Street lights, still on, threw a yellowish glare through the mist so that our shadows moved from behind us to in front before elongating and fading out every few meters. I could have been home in Edinburgh: the stone homes, the cool mist, the yellow vapor lights, the wet earthy smell of the morning as the pre-dawn darkness lightened to gray.

I noticed a small animal scamper off under some low bushes as we neared one yard, and, in glancing at that little creature, I was brought back immediately to just how far I'd come. Its single front-leg never touched the ground as it loped with quick strides into the bush. Moments later, a four-winged bird flew toward us, no more than three or four meters off the ground, and hovered to stare at us.

Janice laughed and waved her hand at it to shoo the bird off. "That's a kurra," she said. "They're very curious, a lot of people have them as pets."

"In cages?"

"Cages? No, a kurra wouldn't stand for that. They just stay in the homes of people who feed them and pet them. They love to be stroked along their throats."

"And that animal that ran into the bush, what was that?"

"A dewlong? I didn't see it, but it must have been. They look a bit like a cross between one of your rabbits and a cat, I suppose. Yes, they domesticate, too, and they're everywhere. They're very clean little animals, and they've accommodated well to our presence here. The experts say there are even more dewlongs now than when we first landed. They're cute little things, very cuddly. I've had them as pets from time to time."

She turned to look me in the eyes as she walked. "It's beautiful out here in the morning, isn't it? And you're keeping up fine, Clifford. I knew you would. You were an athlete in your younger days, as I recall."

"How did you know that?"

"You're better known here than you think," she said, and then added "'We warm nicely in the rain / stride by stride as/ we run that bouldered shore / where the legions faltered / and ceased at last / the outward surge of empire.' That's from 'Running in the Rain.' From your *Clearances* collection, right?"

This place, and this young girl, were full of surprises. I had published six collections of poetry in the years I had taught in Edinburgh. They had sold well enough, for poetry, and earned me a small reputation as a minor expatriate American poet. But for someone to have memorized a poem from one of them?

"Where in heaven's name did you find a copy of that?"

"At the university. You're taught there. That's one of the lit teacher's favorite poems. She went on and on about what a wonderful poet you are. I'm sure she's excited about having a chance to meet you while you're here. I had to memorize that poem and half-a-dozen others for my final examina-

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tion—god, ten years ago now." She laughed. "You don't act it, Clifford Lamb, but you're really quite famous."

"Famous? Hardly. I'd like to meet that teacher and thank her, though. I must have more readers here than back home."

"Truly? That seems strange, doesn't it? You must just be acting humble, Clifford. I wager we could find several of your collections in the city center bookstore right now."

"I wonder how they got here? I didn't know any of my little books had been sent all the way to Caledonia."

"Well, they certainly got here by S'hudonni freighter," she laughed. "Most books come digitized, of course, and then we print them here. I'm not sure how Professor Lindsay came to find that one poem, or pick it out, but it's quite famous. The poem seems to speak to us, you know, talking about empires and outward edges and all."

"Yes, I guess it would, though I don't recall having thought of any of that as I wrote it."

"For god's sake," she laughed, "don't let Professor Lindsay know that! She's convinced us all that you meant every word of it to be understood by *us*."

"I won't tell a soul."

"Neither will I," Janice said, and then smiled at me warmly before turning away and stepping up the pace. "Let's build up a little momentum, Clifford, there's a bit of a climb up around this corner."

We rounded the corner and headed up a gentle incline. Janice glided up it easily. I took it with more work, but was pleased to realize I could handle it well enough. We were a good four or five kilometers into the walk and I felt fine, quite good even, loose and warm and good.

The incline steepened, and we left the ground mist below us as we climbed through a small park. The scenery reminded me of my long walks through Edinburgh's Holyrood Park, striding along the paved road that runs right around Arthur's Seat, the small mountain that rises near the heart of the city.

It was always a difficult climb there, one I struggled with a few times a week, climbing easily at first and then finding it tougher and tougher as I neared the crest of the road. As the years went by, that incline had seemed to grow steeper. But now, pleasantly, my calves and my breathing felt fine.

In twenty minutes more, we rounded a final corner and the road flattened out. We had reached the top of the climb. Janice stopped, turned to look at me. "I wanted you to see this," she said, and pointed over my shoulder.

I turned to stare at the distant sunrise. We were no more than two hundred meters above the ground fog, but it was enough. The pewter sky was easing into a faint, pale blue as I watched the sun rise behind a distant volcanic mountain. The fog still hugged the ground, but the air above was startling in its clarity. I could see Leuchars spread out below, not unlike the view from Calton Hill back in Edinburgh. To the west, a morning thunderhead rose from the bay, its top half reflecting the dawn's light in startling shades of pink and red. I hadn't seen such a sky since Florida, all those years ago. While I looked that way a bolt of lightning flashed deep within the cloud. A few moments later came a rumble of thunder.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" she said. "That sunrise over the city is the main reason I run so early every day."

"It's magnificent."

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We stood there, cooling in the breeze, as she talked about her city, "It's not a bad little city, really. We know it's not Earth, of course, that it doesn't have anything like the wonders of the home world. But we manage, you know? We publish our books, we have two different live theater groups, we have the university and some writers' groups and . . ." she stopped, laughed. "That must all sound very silly to you, very defensive, my talking about Leuchars like this."

"On the contrary, I'm thoroughly enjoying hearing what you have to say, Janice." I was, in fact, watching her as she spoke of it. Her cheeks were lightly flushed from the exercise and the cool wind, her eyes clear and blue. Her jaw, strong and angular, gave her face a strength that matched her physical fitness. "It's a remarkable place, your Leuchars. I'm very happy to be here, to have a chance to stay for awhile, to teach and write. I find this all very rejuvenating. Though I'd prefer it a little calmer, to be honest."

She laughed at that, and then, as if on cue, we heard a low, distant whoomph. An odd sound for thunder, I thought.

We turned to look and there, near the far edge of the city, a column of smoke was rising.

"Oh, no," she said. "What could that . . ."

There was a flash of bright light, perhaps a half-mile away to the south. A few seconds later came the sharp thud of another deep blast.

"Oh, my god, Clifford!"

And it happened again, to the east. In moments, columns of smoke were rising from all three sites.

We headed back to Seals's house, at first walking quickly, and then, as we heard another distant explosion and then yet another, this one closer, we started moving more and more quickly, until we were trotting, and then running.

As we picked up the pace, that thunderhead we'd seen at the city's edge came toward us, first kicking up a breeze and then, as we neared Seals's house, dropping fat, scattered raindrops around us on the pavement.

I shouldn't have been physically able to run as I did, full stride for at least two miles, a frantic pace. At that, Janice was well ahead of me, hurrying home, hurrying to her friends.

The fat drops became more numerous and then a hard squall line came up on me from behind. I lost track of Janice in the gray wall of rain as it passed over me.

I was no more than three blocks away when I heard a final, terrible explosion ahead. Legs pumping, arms in motion as if pulling me along, I ran harder still, a right turn, and then down a block and a left and there, damn it, I saw it, a small, black cloud rising through the downpour. Too late. I felt that oppressive lead in my gut that I remembered from times past. Too damn late.

I came closer, and there, next to that bright and brilliant tree at the edge of Seals' yard, glorious in its bright yellow plumage, stood Janice, screaming in the rain, hands tugging at her hair as she fell to her knees in anguish. In his yard, near his car, stood Paul Seals, his face contorted, his hands blackened at his side. In the car, silhouetted by flame, was what had been Pauline, her arms upraised in supplication, the fire roaring past the dark figure, licking out through the windows, hungry, hungry for more. I could hear the hot hiss of the rain splashing against the hot metal.

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Chapter Five

He passes away under a cloud, inscrutable at heart, forgotten, unforgiven, and excessively romantic.

—Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim.*

There were sirens everywhere, I realized as I stood there, my senses sharpened by the horror and the fear. Sirens, the crackle of the flames in the downpour, the terrible stink of burning rubber and paint and scorched metal and acrid steam; and there, in that awful mix, the terrible smell of meat, of burning death.

"Paul," I said, walking toward him. The moment, surreal in its details, agonized slowly toward a painful reality. "Paul," I said again, and he turned to look at me, his face contorted with grief. He started to speak, saw something behind me; his eyes widened, and he turned and ran for his door.

I turned to face what Paul had seen: a little rag-tag army coming up the street. There were perhaps a hundred older men and a few women, with Bailey in their lead. They carried weapons they'd fashioned from the implements of their daily lives—plowshares beaten into swords, here on a world where they were no weapons.

And they were marching our way.

"Lamb! Mr. Lamb!" Bailey yelled at me. I stood there and waited for him as he walked briskly over to me, drenched from the rain but his face alight with a kind of fever. He was enjoying this immensely.

"Lamb, I'm so glad you're all right! It's been a terrible day, a terrible day. I've invoked martial law and we're doing our best now to restore order. My god, there've been explosions all over the city."

"Where's the governor general?"

He sighed, his expression one that mixed contained glee with faux sympathy. "I'm afraid she's collapsed under the strain. Completely incoherent. She's in Government House now, resting."

"Under house arrest?"

He looked at me oddly, realizing for the first time, I think, that I wasn't firmly in his camp. "Absolutely not. She's under sedation, and I've had to step in temporarily, as the Constitution requires."

"And why are you here?"

"To arrest Seals, of course. He's the cause of all this, Lamb, as we discussed. You agreed with me, remember? You could see he's the reason for all this violence, these explosions. Lamb, my god, people have been hurt, perhaps some of them killed."

"And he caused this? Paul Seals set off these explosions?"

"Yes, or had his followers set them off. I'm convinced of it." Bailey waved toward several of his supporters, armed with cricket bats and shovels. They walked our way, hefting their makeshift weapons, glowering happily in their moment of power.

God, I'd seen that look before in men's eyes, the look of the immortal, supreme in supposed power—ready here to take on the first-borns and anyone else who got in their way.

I shook my head. "Bailey, you should just walk away from here. Seals had nothing to do with this." In fact, I wondered if Bailey himself hadn't arranged for the explosions; that made more sense than anything else. This whole conflagration, the chaos, the fear, might well be his construction.

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"Nothing to do with this! My god, you're a sympathizer with them, Lamb!" He motioned to the two and they walked over to me, stood at my side, ready to take me under arrest.

"Do you think the S'hudonni will stand for this coup d'etat, Bailey?"

"I've spoken to your friend Twoclicks, Lamb. He understands the necessity of what I'm doing here. He'll back me fully."

But my question had reminded him of my friendship with Twoclicks, and a slight shake of the head to the two men was enough to get them to back away from me.

I wondered if Bailey's version of what Twoclicks had said was as much a lie as his version of what *I'd* said. Probably, which meant Twoclicks might not have agreed with all this at all, and a screamship might come roaring in at any time. Then what would happen? Death, again, as it had happened for me in the past? Perhaps.

"Go with these men, Lamb," Bailey said, polite and careful with his language and his tone. "No harm will come to you. We'll just keep you quiet until we can get you off-planet and up to the station. From there you'll get the first freighter back to Earth. Easy, right?"

It *was* easy. I could just walk away and be done with this. It was not, after all, my fight. It never had been. Both sides had assumed I supported them, both knew of my friendship with Twoclicks and thought that somehow I wielded influence.

They couldn't have been more wrong. And while this was the right time to make my exit, I realized, standing there staring at Bailey, that I couldn't. I'd made my choices here.

There was a distant rumble. It grew louder and the crowed milling around our tragic scene stopped in mid stride, stood there, then looked up, scanning the sky through the gray smoke and the rain, easing off now with the passing of the squall line.

The roar rose into a scream and then suddenly stopped and there, above us, was a screamship. The same one I'd seen two weeks before? No way to know, and it probably didn't matter. A screamship, that's all that we needed to know, hanging there, intensely quiet, all power and glory forever hallelujah.

I knew then what I had to do, what this was all about, how it had been designed for me, planned for me.

I turned my back on Bailey and walked toward the front door of Paul Seals's house. Bailey cursed me, under his breath at first as I turned away from him, and then more openly as I walked away.

"Lamb, damnit, you're *wrong,* this has to be done my way, for the sake of all of us, for the sake of Leuchars. Goddamnit, for the sake of humanity!"

Ah, there was his mistake. Humanity. I walked on.

I reached the door, hesitated. Should I walk in? Stand there and shout? I shrugged, knocked politely.

"Come on in, Lamb," said Paul from inside.

I entered. He stood there. "It's all gone to hell, hasn't it," he said, not phrasing it as a question, saying it with certainty.

"Maybe. There's a screamship out there, just watching. If it's on your side, then you'll win, it's that simple."

"And if it's on their side, the side of order and control?"

"Then, yes, it's over. But there's no reason to die for this, Paul, no reason for anyone else to suffer."

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"She was," he said, "the most wonderful person, my sister. She was everything I tried to be but couldn't. She had so much patience."

I smiled, nodded. "I liked her, Paul. Everyone liked her. She was a wonderful person."

"And look what happened to her."

"Yes, and we'll have to find out who did it and punish them. But no more death now, Paul, not here."

He started crying, reached out to me, held me by my shoulders, sobbing. "I just thought if we said it all loud enough, and long enough, that we could make it happen, you know? And then I thought that just a scare, just enough of something to make them pay attention, and we could change things. Jesus, I had no idea this would happen."

"The first bombs?"

"Oh, hell, yes. I was tired of words."

"And today's?"

"No, none of this. For Christ's sake, she was my sister, *my sister!* No, none of this."

"Okay, then. You didn't hurt anybody, Paul. Some property damage, and you bruised me up some." I smiled. "But I'm over it now, and I won't press charges."

I held out my hand. If I could get him out there while the screamship was there, maybe with Twoclicks inside, I could probably keep him alive. The mob wouldn't try to beat him to death with a screamship hovering right over their heads.

Paul suddenly looked very tired to me. The manic energy from the horror he'd just seen, the energy that drove him toward madness, had drained away, leaving nothing but an enormous sadness, maybe, for what his life had been like before this awful day. God, I knew that feeling.

He staggered toward me, defeated. I put my right arm around him, turned us both around, opened the door with my left hand, and we headed out.

The rain had stopped. The mob of older colonials had grown in the few minutes I'd been inside. There were hundreds now, angry, buzzing with an animated hostility toward Paul, toward all the first-borns, maybe even toward me, depending on what trouble Bailey had been stirring up among them.

Above them, over us all, that screamship floated silently, blotting out the morning sky, watching over us, god-like.

We walked down the short front walk toward the gate. Paul's car still smoldered, a few firefighters standing over it now, playing hoses on it. Janice had found a car, god knows where or how, and was waiting there, in the driver's seat. If we could get there, get in, and get away before all this exploded into chaos then, I figured, there would be time enough for things to calm down, for reason to return.

We reached the gate. Then, as I put my hand on it to swing it open, I heard a new noise, another angry buzz.

Paul said "Look," and tilted his head in the direction I'd come running in from just a few minutes before.

It was the first-borns, dozens of them, walking toward us, linked arm-in-arm.

The mob in front of us couldn't hear the first-borns' approach over their own babble, but then a few at the fringe saw the new group, poked those

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next to them to show them, and the word spread in moments. The crowd turned to look at the new arrivals.

The older colonials outnumbered the first-borns two or three to one. Unless some had put together home-made bombs of some sort (and god knew that was entirely possible) this was going to be a hand-to-hand battle, using shovels and cudgels and cricket bats. There would be a lot of cracked skulls out there, I knew. That, and the final tearing apart of this little society's peaceful existence.

Could the screamship stop all this somehow? Would it? Was Twoclicks up there watching? Was he laughing?

Oh, hell. I hadn't asked for this, but here I was. And if the memories of my past failures still haunted me, well, the thought of failing again was an even larger specter.

I shouted out. "Wait!"

A few heard me, and turned back to look. Again, "Wait! Listen to me!"

A few more turned, then more and it spread. I had their attention.

"This won't help," I yelled out to them. "Fighting each other won't help. Killing each other won't help."

Bailey emerged from the front of the crowd, his face contorted in anger. "Look at you, standing there with Seals. He's killed a lot of our friends with his bombs today. People have *died,* Lamb. You hear me, our friends have been killed!"

I raised my hands. "So let it stop there, Bailey. No more death. Not this way, not here."

He held a long, stout club in his hands. He raised it. "We'll stop it, Lamb. We'll stop it for good, starting with Seals. Don't get in our way!" And he charged toward us, that club held high.

I pushed Seals out of the way and ran toward Bailey, thinking to tackle him, wrestle him to the ground before it was too late, before everything exploded into pain and death.

As we approached each other, he began to swing the club. I could see it in uncanny detail as it arced toward me—a meter or so long, as big around as a coffee can, polished wood; some piece of furniture, I guessed with a strangely calm part of my brain. I was about to be clobbered with the leg of a table.

But I surprised even myself, moving more quickly than I would have thought possible, getting inside the arc of that swing before he could strike me.

I grabbed Bailey in a bear hug, started squeezing, stronger than I'd ever felt in my life—glorious in that strength suddenly, feeling an enormous sense of well-being, of calm serenity in the midst of all this frenzied motion.

The crowd froze to watch our struggle. I squeezed harder and Bailey dropped the club. I heard his ribs crack beneath my crushing grip. He cried out in pain. I let him go, and he fell to his knees on the ground.

I'd won.

His head hung down. He seemed haggard, beaten. I thought surely the hate had been squeezed out of him.

"C'mon, Bailey." I offered him my hand. "Get up. Let's talk to these people. Let's tell them what we have to tell them. Let's get them headed home before things get any worse."

To my surprise, he shook his head no and then slowly looked up, a strange grin on his face, a look of dark triumph. For a moment, I couldn't figure out why.

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And then, to my right and at the back of the crowd, there was an explosion. I looked that way and saw the last moment of blue flame quickly covered by a rising cloud of gray. Then another, to my left, this one also inside the back edge of the crowd.

There were a few long seconds of stunned silence, and then the crowd exploded in anger and fear, surging away from the bombs, surging toward where we stood.

Over our heads, there was a high-pitched warning shriek, and then the screamship opened fire, onto the front yard just behind where Bailey and I stood. It was a warning shot, one meant to quell the rush of the crowd.

It didn't work. The front of the crowd tried to stop, threatened by that bright vortex, but those behind, pushed by those even farther behind, continued to move forward.

Bailey, screaming in fear, ran from me, scrambling on his hands and knees to get away from the thin, blue tunnel of death that marched toward us.

As he ran, the light followed him, seeking him out, searching for him. That was the S'hudonni plan, then, to exorcise this devil now, take this opportunity to end his reign before it truly began. In a few seconds he'd be covered by it, the panic would escalate, hundreds might die, *would* die. I knew this. With a terrible, deadly certainty, I knew it.

And I knew what I could do about it. I'd failed again. I'd been named a leader by both sides and I'd failed them both. But there *was* an answer.

It was the calmest, most serene moment of my life. The decision made, the understanding of it all so very clear.

Thirty meters away, in front of me, a ruined distribution truck from *The Observer* lay on its side, its windscreen shattered. "To Tell the Truth," was written in script across the side panels. To get to Bailey the light would have to cross that wreck, etch a burned path across those words.

I ran to the truck, scrambled atop it and turned to watch the light approach. Standing there, above the fray, knowing the crowd could see me, I raised my arms in acceptance, embraced the column of searing light that moved my way, ten feet from me, then five. It seemed to hesitate, to slow its march as it reached the edge of the truck.

I could not feel the heat. Isn't that strange? No more than two meters away the pavement bubbled beneath it, macadam melting and scorching in its heat, but I couldn't feel it.

It moved again, angling away from me.

No. Not that. Not away. Quickly, firmly, I looked up toward the screamship that brought all this to us, to me, and then took two strong steps and, arms outstretched in that wonderful embrace, leaped into the light.

Chapter Six

In all the broad expanse of tranquil light, I saw no shadow of another parting.

—Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

A huge face swam over me; a bulbous smile, a deep chuckle. "Wass *wonderful* Lamb. What you did was simply *wonderful!*"

It was Twoclicks, bubbling with merriment. "A moment sstraight from your Conrad—the ssacrifice for honor, yes? To die to ssave others and earn

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honor back, yess. Expiation. Penance. *Very* Catholic, Lamb! Ah, it wass brilliant!"

"I'm alive?"

"Oh, yess. Very much sso. Alive, and a hero. I have told the Governor General that you live. Later today, when we land in the park and we emerge, you and I, from the ship, there will be thoussandss to ssee you there."

"A hero?"

"You died to save them, Lamb. They know thiss. Both ssides, they know that you offered yoursself to stop the riotss before more died."

He laughed out loud, that fat, bloated body shaking with merriment. "It wass absolutely *perfect*. I gave you a ssecond or two, jusst for impact, and then sstopped the weapon. You were outlined in it, blazing in it, Lamb! And then I ussed the stasis field and brought you on board, set the devices to work on repairs, and now," he waved those stubby arms dramatically, "here you are! The Hero of the Day!"

"*You* did this, Twoclicks? You did this to me?" I was very tired.

His whole body moved forward with that nodding head. It was almost a bow, he bent so low to say yes to me.

"Why am I alive?"

"Why? To ssave thiss colony, to make thiss place work."

"No, no. I mean 'how' am I alive. Why didn't I die in that flame, that heat?"

"Ah," he smiled again. "Weapon doess not affect uss, of course, Lamb. Iss simple thing, really. Excites molecules. Friction. Heat. Ssomething like that. But we are," he paused, thought it through, said vaguely, "protected."

"And me?"

"As I ssaid, Lamb, protected."

"*I'm* protected?"

He looked at me, sighed, spoke as if to a slow child, said what I did not want to hear. "Yes, Lamb. You are one of *uss* now. Remember? Those devices insside you? They rebuild, create, assemble, repair. *And* protect."

"I didn't ask for this."

"That could be argued, Lamb."

"I'm not sure I can do this, do what you say you need, Twoclicks."

"You can," he said, and smiled that huge, wide smile at me one more time. "I will help! We will have the besst time!" And he reached out with those thin, frail arms to give me a hug. I am, I suppose, the only Earthie to have been hugged by a S'hudonni.

Later, that evening, as Arran rose in the east, we came in over Leuchars' main city park, hovered there for awhile, screaming and rumbling, impressive as hell.

The inevitable crowd gathered. We lowered that wide ramp. Together, Twoclicks and I, we walked down it. Klaatu barada nikto.

And he was right, of course. They cheered me wildly, both the older colonials and the first-borns. I was the answer they sought. They needed a leader here, someone they admired and could follow. The Governor General seemed especially happy to see me. The transition will make her quite happy, I think.

Twoclicks needed a leader here, too, someone who could bring these people together, keep them together here on the fringes of empire, here where the outermost fortress looked out toward the emptiness, toward the wild lands where savages hid in wait.

He's explained it to me, how crucial this orbital outpost is to S'hudon's

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trade routes, and how crucial the small human population is to the support of that outpost. It's all about profit, really.

And me? Well, in my mind I'm still the aging poet. I find time, a few hours a week, sometimes more, to scribble down a few thoughts and share them with Janice.

Outwardly, I show the impact of S'hudon's technology. I am younger, a lot younger, in appearance than I have a right to be. I'm healthy. I'm never sick. Janice thinks we make a fine couple together.

And my arm, the one shattered by the dirt and pain of a memory decades old? Well, it's strong again, that arm. It's complete. In that sense, at least, I am finally whole.

But the ground-in dirt, the reminder of who I was and what I did—I've left that there. I have only to ask and the S'hudonni devices will clean that up. It might take them a total of fifteen minutes.

But that seems wrong somehow. I haven't earned it yet, not truly. Standing on the balcony of Government House, looking out toward the city park where Twoclicks' screamship hovers, waiting his return from our final dinner party before he finally heads home to S'hudon to report on his successes, I don't know if I ever will. I also don't know if it matters that much anymore. There is here. There is now.

And that, I think, will probably have to do. O

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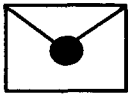

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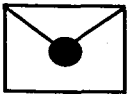

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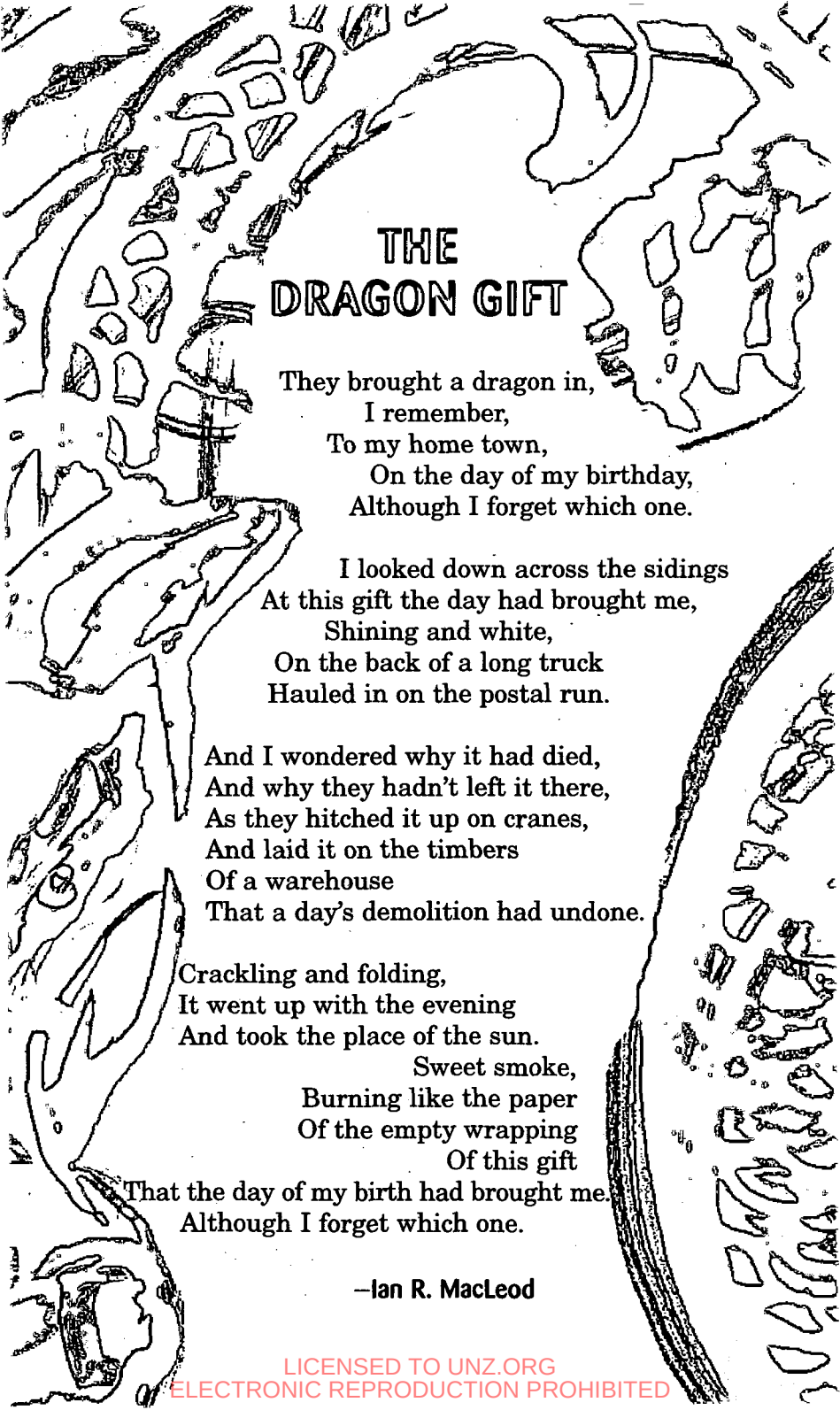

THE DRAGON GIFT

They brought a dragon in,
I remember,
To my home town,
On the day of my birthday,
Although I forget which one.

I looked down across the sidings
At this gift the day had brought me,
Shining and white,
On the back of a long truck
Hauled in on the postal run.

And I wondered why it had died,
And why they hadn't left it there,
As they hitched it up on cranes,
And laid it on the timbers
Of a warehouse
That a day's demolition had undone.

Crackling and folding,
It went up with the evening
And took the place of the sun.
Sweet smoke,
Burning like the paper
Of the empty wrapping
Of this gift
That the day of my birth had brought me.
Although I forget which one.

—Ian R. MacLeod

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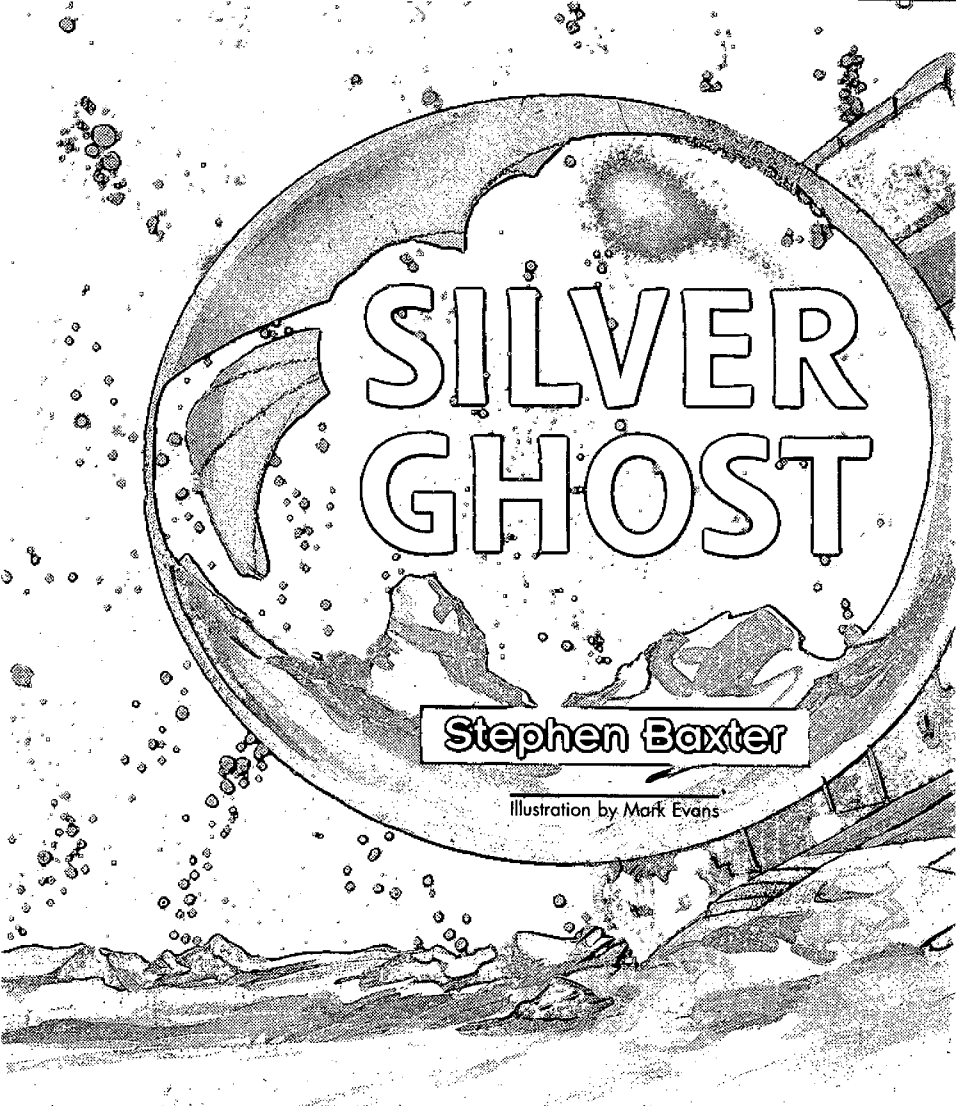

Stephen Baxter's haunting new tale is a prequel to two *Asimov's* stories, "Planck Zero" (January 1992) and "Soliton Star" (May 1997). These tales are part of his "Xeelee Sequence" of stories and novels. The author is planning to write more about the Sequence in the future.

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Minda didn't even see the volcanic plume before it swallowed up her flitter.

Suddenly the fragile little craft was turning end over end, alarms wailing and flashing, all its sensors immediately disabled. But to Minda—feeling nothing thanks to her cabin's inertial suspension—it was just a light show, a Virtual game, nothing to do with *her.*

Just seconds after entering the ash plume, the flitter rammed itself upside down into an unfeasibly hard ground. She heard a scream of crumpling metal as the flitter came to rest.

Then the inertial suspension failed. Minda tumbled out of her seat, and her head slammed into the cabin roof.

Sprawled on the inverted ceiling, immersed in sudden silence, she found herself staring out of a window. Gushing vapor obscured the landscape. That was *air*, she thought woozily. The frozen air of this world, of Snowball, blasting to vapor at the touch of the flitter's residual heat.

All she could think of was what her cadre leader would have to say. *You fouled up*, Bryn would tell her. *You don't deserve to survive. And the species will be stronger for your deletion.*

I'm fifteen years old; I'm strong. I'm not dead yet. I'll show her.

She passed out.

Maybe she awoke, briefly. She thought she heard a voice.

"... You are a homeotherm. That is, your body tries to maintain a constant temperature. It is a common strategy. You have an inner hot core, which appears to comprise your digestive organs and your nervous system, and an outer cooler shell, of skin and fat and muscle and limbs. The outer shell serves as a buffer between the outside world and the core. Understanding this basic mechanism should help you survive. . . ."

Through the window, through gusts of billowing mist, she glimpsed something moving: a smooth curve sliding easily past the wreck, a distorted image of a crumpled metallic mass. It couldn't be real, of course. Nothing moved on this cold world.

When she woke up properly, it was going to *hurt*. She closed her eyes.

When she couldn't stay unconscious any longer, she was relieved to find she could move.

She climbed gingerly out of the crumpled ceiling panel. She probed at her limbs and back. She seemed to have suffered nothing worse than bruises, stiffness, and pulled muscles.

But she was already feeling cold. And she had a deepening headache that seemed to go beyond the clatter she had suffered during the landing.

Her cabin had been reduced to a ball, barely large enough for her to stand up in. The only light was a dim red emergency glow. She quickly determined she had no comms, not so much as a radio beacon to reveal her position—and there was only a trickle of power. Most of the craft's systems seemed to be down—everything important, anyhow. There was no heat, no air renewal; maybe she was lucky the gathering cold had woken her before the growing foulness of the air put her to sleep permanently.

But she was stuck here.

She sat on the floor, tucking her knees to her chest.

It all seemed a very heavy punishment for what was, after all, a pretty minor breach of discipline.

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Okay, Minda shouldn't have taken a flitter for a sightseeing jaunt around the glimmering curve of the new world. Okay, she shouldn't have gone solo, and should have lodged and stuck to a flight plan. Okay, she shouldn't have flown so low over the ruined city.

But the fact was that after grousing her way through the three long years of the migration flight from Earth—*three years*, a fifth of her whole life—she'd fallen in love with this strange, lonely, frozen planet as soon as it had come swimming toward her through sunless space. She sat glued before Virtual representations of her new home, tracing ocean beds with their frozen lids of ice, continents coated by sparkling frost—and the faint, all-but-erased hints of cities and roads, the mark of the vanished former inhabitants of this unlucky place. The rest of her cadre were more interested in Virtual visions of the future, when new artificial suns would be thrown into orbit around this desolate pebble. But it was Snowball itself that entranced Minda—Snowball as it *was*, here and now, a world deep-frozen for a million years.

As the Spline fleet had lumbered into orbit—as she had endured the ceremonies marking the claiming of this planet on behalf of the human species and the Druz Coalition—she had itched to walk on shining lands embedded in a stillness she had never known in Earth's crowded Conurbations.

Which was why, just a week after the first human landing on Snowball, she had gotten herself into such a mess.

Well, she couldn't stay here. Reluctantly she got to her feet.

With a yank on a pull-tag, her seat cushion opened up into a survival suit. It was thick and quilted, with an independent air supply and a sewn-in grid of heating elements and lightweight power cells. She sealed herself in. Clean air washed over her face, and the suit's limited medical facilities probed at her torn muscles.

She had to trigger explosive bolts to get the hatch open.

The last of the flitter's air gushed out into a landscape of silver and black. Crystals of frost fell in neat parabolas to an icebound ground. Though she was cocooned in her suit, she felt a deeper chill descend on her.

And as the vapor froze out, again she glimpsed strange sudden movement—a surface like a bubble, or a distorting mirror—an image *of herself*: a silvery figure standing framed in a doorway, ruddy light silhouetting her.

The image shrank away.

It had been like seeing a ghost. This world of death might be full of ghosts. I should be scared, she thought.

But I'm walking away from a volcanic eruption and a flitter crash. One thing at a time, Minda.

Clumsily she clambered through the crash-distorted hatchway.

She found herself standing in a drift of loose, feathery snow that came up to her knees. Beneath the snow was a harder surface: perhaps water ice, even bare rock. Where her suit touched the snow, vapor billowed around her.

To her left that volcano loomed above the horizon, belching foul black fast-moving plumes that obscured the stars. And to her right, in a shallow valley, she made out structures—low, broken walls, perhaps a gridwork of streets. Everything was crystal clear: no mist to spoil the view on this world, where every molecule of atmosphere lay as frost on the ground.

The sky was black and without a sun—yet it was far more crowded than the sky of Earth, for here, at the edge of the great interstellar void known as the Local Bubble, the hot young stars of Scorpio were close and dazzling.

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It was wonderful, what she had borrowed the flitter to come see. And yet it was lethal: every wisp of gas around her feet was a monument to more lost heat.

Her fingers and toes were numb, and painful when she flexed them.

She walked around the crash site. The flitter had dug itself a trench on landing. The craft had finished up as a rough, crumpled sphere. As it crashed the flitter had let itself implode, giving up its structural integrity to protect the life bubble at its heart—to protect *her*. Now it had nothing left to give her.

Her suit would expire after no more than a few hours. She had no way to tell Bryn where she was—they probably hadn't even missed her yet. And she and her flitter made no more than a metallic pinprick in the hide of a world as large as Earth.

She was, she thought wonderingly, going to die here.

She spoke it out loud, trying to make it real. "I'm going to die." But she was Minda. How could *she* die? Would history go on after her? Would mankind sweep on, outward from the Earth, an irresistible colonizing wave that would crest far beyond this lonely outpost, with her name no more than a minor footnote? "I haven't *done* anything yet. I haven't even had *sex* properly—"

A vast, silvered epidermis ballooned before her, and a voice spoke neutrally in her ear.

"Nor, as it happens, have I."

It was the silver ghost.

She screamed and fell back in the snow.

It was a bauble, silvered, perhaps two meters across. It was hovering a meter above the ground, like a huge droplet of mercury. It was so perfectly reflective that it was as if she couldn't see *it* at all: only a fish-eye reflection of the flitter wreck and her own sprawled self, as if a piece of the world had been cut out and folded over.

And this silvery, ghostly, not-really-there creature was *talking* to her.

"Native life forms are emerging from dormancy," said a flat, machine-generated voice. "Your heat is feeding them. To them you are a brief, unlikely summer. . . . How fascinating."

Clumsy in her thick protective suit, bombarded by shocks and strangeness, she twisted her head to see.

The snow was melting all around her, gushing up in thin clouds of vapor that quickly refroze and fell back, so that she was lying in the center of a spreading crater dug out of the soft snow. And in that crater there was movement.

Colors spread over the ice, all around her: green and purple and even red, patches of it like lichen, widening as she watched. A clutch of what looked like worms wriggled in fractured ice. She even saw a tiny flower push out of a mound of frozen air, widening a crimson mouth.

Struck with revulsion, she stumbled to her feet.

With her heat gone the life forms dwindled back: the colors leached out of the lichen-like patches, and that single flower closed, as if regretfully.

"A strange scene," said the silver ghost. "But it is a common tactic. The living things here must endure centuries in stillness and silence, waiting a chance benison of heat—from volcanic activity, perhaps even a cometary impact. And in those rare, precious moments, they live and die, propagate and breed, perhaps even dream of better times in the past."

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Save for orientation exercises run by the Commission for Historical Truth, Minda had never encountered an alien before. She bunched her fists. "Are you a Qax?"

"... No," it replied, after some hesitation. "Not a Qax."

"Then what?"

Again that hesitation. "Our kinds have never met before. What are *you*?"

"I'm a human being," she said defiantly. She pushed out her chest; her suit was emblazoned with a green tetrahedron, the sigil of free humanity. "And this is *our* planet."

The ghost hovered, impassive.

She glanced back at the pit she had made. "These things are dead," she said. "Effectively. They cannot compete with us."

"Compete?"

She swiveled her head to confront the hovering ghost. "All life forms compete. It is the way of things." But it was as if her skull was full of a sloshing liquid; she felt herself stumbling forward.

"Try to stay upright," the ghost said, its voice free of inflection. "Your insulation is imperfect. To reduce heat loss, you must minimize your surface contact with the ice. . . ."

"I don't need your help," she growled. But her breath was misting, and there were tiny frost patterns in the corners of her faceplate. The cold was sharp in her nose and mouth and eyes.

The ghost said, "Your body is a bag of liquid water. I surmise you come from a world of high ambient temperatures. I, however, come from a world of cold."

"Where?"

The hovering globe's hide was featureless, but nevertheless she had the impression that it was spinning. "Toward the center of the Galaxy." Something untranslatable. A distance? "And yours?"

She knew how to find the sun from here.

Minda had traveled across a hundred and fifty light years, at the edge of the great colonizing bubble called the Third Expansion, toward the brilliant young stars of Scorpio and the Southern Cross. Now those dazzling beacons were easily identifiable in the sky over her head, jewels thrown against the paler wash of the Galaxy center. To find home, all she had to do was look the other way, back the way the great fleet of Spline ships had come; the sun, and Earth and all the familiar planets, were therefore somewhere beneath her feet, hidden by the bulk of this frozen rock.

She was never going to see Earth again, she thought suddenly, desolately; and because this ice-block world happened to be turned this way rather than that, she would never even see the dim, unremarkable patch of sky where Earth lay.

Without thinking, she found herself looking that way. She snapped her head up. "I mustn't tell you."

"Ah. Competition?"

She wondered if the ghost was somehow mocking her. She said sharply, "If we have never met before, how come I understand you?"

The ghost rolled languidly over the wreck of her flitter.

"Get away," she snapped. "That is mine."

The ghost, subtly spinning, moved back. "You carry a translator box. It is of Squeem design."

Minda hadn't even known her flitter was equipped with a translator box. "It's a *human* design," she said.

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"No," the ghost said gently. "The box understands both our languages. Ironic. It is a strange example of inadvertent cooperation between three species: Squeem, your kind, mine—"

The Squeem were the first extra-solar species humanity had encountered. They were also the first to have occupied the solar system; the Qax, soon after, had been the second. Minda had grown up understanding that the universe was full of alien species hostile to humanity. She glanced around. Were there more silver ghosts out there, criss-crossing the silent plains, their perfect reflectiveness making them invisible to her untrained eye?

She tried not to betray her fear. "Are you alone?"

"There is a large colony here." Again that odd hesitation. "But I, too, am stranded in this place. I came to investigate the city."

"And you were caught by the volcano?"

"My investigation did not advance the goals of the colony." She sensed it was studying her. "You are shivering. Do you understand why? Your body knows it is losing heat faster than it is being replaced. The shivering reflex exercises many muscles, increasing heat production by burning fuel. It is a short-term tactic, but—"

"You know a lot about human bodies."

"No," it said. "I know a lot about heat. I am equipped to survive in this heat-sink landscape for extended periods. You, however, are weaker."

It was as if cadre-leader Bryn was lecturing her on the endless struggle that was the only future for mankind. *We cannot be weak. The Qax found us weak. They enslaved us and almost wiped our minds clean. If we are unfit for this new world, we must make ourselves fit. Whatever it takes. For only the fittest survive.*

If she let herself die before this enigmatic silver ghost, she would be conceding the new world to an alien race.

Impulsively, she began to stalk into the shallow valley, toward the antique city. Maybe there was something there she could use to signal, or survive.

The silver ghost followed her. It swam with a smooth, unnatural ease; it was a motion neither biological nor mechanical that she found disturbing.

She pushed through snowed-out air. The cold seemed to be settling in her lungs, and when she spoke her voice quavered from shivering.

"Why are you here? What do you *want* on Snowball?"

"We are—" a hesitant pause "—researchers. This world is like a laboratory to us. This is a rare place, you see, because interstellar collisions, of the kind that hurled this world into the dark, are rare. We are conducting experiments in low-temperature physics."

"You're talking about absolute zero. Everybody knows you can't reach absolute zero."

"The universe was hot when it was born," the ghost said gently. "Very hot. Since then it has expanded and cooled, slowly. But it still retains a little of that primal warmth. In the future, it will grow much colder yet. We want to know what will happen then. For example, it seems that at very low temperatures quantum wave functions—which determine the position of atoms—spread out to many times their normal size. Matter condenses into a new jelly-like form, in which all the atoms are in an identical quantum state, as if lased. . . ."

Minda didn't want to admit she understood none of this.

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The ghost said, "You see, we seek to study matter and energy in configurations that might, perhaps, never before have occurred in all the universe's history."

She clambered over low, shattered walls, favoring hands and feet that ached with the cold. "That's a strange thought."

"Yes. How does matter *know* what to do, if it has never done it before? By probing such questions we explore the boundaries of reality."

She stopped, breathing hard, and gazed up at the hovering ghost. "Is that *all* you do, this physics stuff? Do you have a family?"

"That is . . . complicated. More yes than no. Do you?"

"I met my parents before I left home. They were there at my Naming, but I don't remember that. We have cadres. . . . Do you have music?"

"No. We have other arts. Tell me why *you* are here."

She frowned. "We have a right to be here." She waved an arm over the sky. "Some day humans are going to reach every star in the sky, and live there."

"Why?"

"Because if we don't, somebody else will."

"Is that all *you* do?" the ghost asked. "Fly to the stars and build cities?"

"No. We have music and poetry and other stuff." Defensively, she plodded on through deepening snow. "Soon we'll change this world. We're going to terraform it." She had to explain what that meant. "We have brought creatures with us that are used to the cold. We found them on an ice moon a long way from the sun. They have liquid helium for blood. Now we farm them."

"How remarkable."

"It will be a heroic project. It will require hard work, ingenuity and perseverance."

The ghost said, "There are already creatures living here."

"We'll put them in cases," said Minda. "Or zoos."

"We, my kind, can live here, on this cold world, without making it warm."

"Then you'll have to leave," she snapped.

She reached the outskirts of the city.

It was a gridwork of foundations and low walls, all of it half-buried under a blanket of rock-hard water ice and frozen air. The buildings and roads seemed to follow a pattern of interlocking hexagons, quite unlike the cramped, organic design of modern Conurbations on Earth, or the rectangular layout of many older, pre-Qax human settlements.

As she walked along what might once have been a street, the pain in her hands and feet seemed to be metamorphosing to an ominous numbness.

The ghost seemed to notice this. "You continue to lose heat," it said. "Shivering is no longer enough to warm you. Now your body is drawing heat back from your extremities to your core. Your limbs are stiffening—"

"Shut up," she hissed.

She found a waist-high fragment of wall protruding from the layers of ice. She brushed at it with her glove; loose snow fell away, revealing a surface of what looked like simple brick. But it crumbled at her touch, perhaps frost-shattered.

She walked on into what might once have been a room, a space bounded by six broken, crumbled walls. Though there were many rooms close by here—clustered like a honeycomb, closer than would have been comfortable for people—it was hard to believe the inhabitants of this place had been so different from humans.

She wondered what it had been like here, *before.*

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Once, Snowball had been Earth-like. There had been continents, oceans of water, and life—based on an organic chemistry of carbon, oxygen, and water, like Earth life, and it had worked to create an atmosphere of oxygen and nitrogen, not so dissimilar to Earth's.

And there had been people here: people who had built cities, and breathed air, and perhaps gazed at the stars.

But the long afternoon of this world had been disturbed.

Its sun had suffered a chance close collision with another star. It was an unlucky, unlikely event, Minda knew; away from the Galaxy's center the stars were thinly scattered. As the interloper fell through the orderly heart of this world's home system, there must have been immense tides, ocean waves that ground cities to dust, and earthquakes, a flexing of the rocky crust itself.

And then, at the intruder's closest approach, Snowball was slingshot out of the heart of its system.

The home sun had receded steadily. Ice spread from polar caps across the land and the oceans, until much of the planet was clad in a thick layer of hardening water ice. At last the very air began to rain out of the sky, liquid oxygen and nitrogen running down the frozen river valleys to pool atop the vast ice sheets, forming a softer snow meters thick.

She wondered what had become of the people. Had they retreated underground into vast caves? Had they fled their planet altogether—perhaps even pursued new worlds surrounding the wrecking star?

". . . this world is not without heat," the ghost said softly. "The deep heart of a planet this size would scarcely notice the loss of its sun."

"The volcano," Minda said dully.

"Yes. Vents of hot material on the spreading sea bed have even kept the lower levels of the ocean unfrozen. We believe there may still be active life forms there feeding on the planet's geothermal heat. But they must have learned to survive without oxygen. . . ."

"Do you have that on your world? Deep heat, water under the ice?"

"Yes. But my world is small and cold; long ago it lost much of its inner heat."

"The world I come from is bigger than this frozen ruin," she said, spreading her arms wide. "It has lots of heat. And it is a double world. It has a Moon. I bet even the Moon is bigger than *your* world."

"Perhaps it is," the ghost said. "It must be a wonderful place."

"Yes, it is. Better than your world. Better than *this*."

"Yes."

She was very tired. She didn't seem to be hungry, or thirsty. She wondered how long it was since she had eaten. She stared at the frozen air around her, trying to remember why she had come here. An idea sparked, fitfully.

She got to her knees. She could feel the diamond grid of the suit's heating elements press into the flesh of her legs. She swept aside the loose snow, but beneath there was only a floor of hard water ice.

"There's nothing here," she said dully.

"Of course not," the ghost said gently. "The tides washed it all away."

She began to pull together armfuls of loose snow. Much of it melted and evaporated, but slowly she made a mound of it in the center of the room.

"What are you doing?"

"Maybe I can breathe this stuff." She knew little about the flitter's systems. Maybe there was some hopper into which she could cram this frozen air.

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But the ghost was talking to her again, its voice gentle but persistent, unwelcome. "Your body is continuing to manage the crisis. Carbohydrates that would normally feed your brain are now being burnt to generate more heat. Your brain, starved, is slowing down; your judgment and coordination are poor."

"I don't care," she growled, scraping at the frozen air.

"Your plan is not likely to succeed. Your biology requires oxygen. But the bulk of this snow is nitrogen. And there are trace compounds that may be toxic to you. Does your craft contain filtering systems that—"

Minda drove her suited arm through the pile of air, scattering it in a cloud of vapor. "Shut up. Shut *up*."

She walked back to the flitter. After a time it felt as if she was floating, like a ghost herself.

The silver ghost told her about the world it came from. It was like Snowball, and yet it was not.

The ghosts' world was once Earth-like, if smaller than Earth: blue skies, a yellow sun. But even as the ghosts climbed to awareness their sun evaporated, killed by a companion pulsar. It was a slower process than the doom of Snowball, but no less lethal. The oceans froze and life huddled inward; there was frantic evolutionary pressure to find ways to keep warm.

Then the atmosphere started snowing.

The ghosts had gathered their fellow creatures around them and formed themselves into compact, silvered spheres, each body barely begrudging an erg to the cold outside. Finally clouds of mirrored life forms rolled upward. The treacherous sky was locked out—but every stray wisp of the planet's internal heat was trapped. . . .

She understood little of this, but the murmuring words were comforting. "My home Conurbation is near a ruined city. A bit like this one. The ruin is an old pre-Occupation city. It was called *Pah-reess.* Did you know that. . . ?"

She found she had reached the flitter. She stopped walking. She was so cold she wasn't even shivering any more. It was almost comfortable.

She found a way to use bits of debris from the flitter, stuck in the ice, to prop herself up without having to lean on anything.

After a time it seemed easier to leave her eyes closed.

"Your body is losing its ability to reheat itself. You must find an external source of heat. You will soon drift into unconsciousness. . . ."

"I'm in my eighth cadre," Minda whispered. "You have to move every two years, you know. But I was *chosen* for my new cadre. I had to pass tests. My best friend is called Janu. She couldn't come with me. She's still on Earth. . . ." She smiled, thinking of Janu.

She felt herself moving.

She forced open her eyes. Frost crackled on her eyelashes. She saw that the pretty, silvered landscape was tipping up around her. She was falling over. It didn't seem to matter any more; at least she could let her sore muscles relax.

Somewhere a voice called her: "Always protect your core heat. It is the most important thing you possess. Remember . . ."

There was something wrong with the silver ghost, she saw, through sparkling frost crystals.

The ghost had come apart. Its silvery hide had unpeeled and removed itself like a semi-sentient overcoat. The hide fell gracelessly to the frozen ground and slithered hastily over toward her.

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She shrank back, repelled. But the hide began to tent itself over her.

What was left of the ghost was a mass of what looked like organs and digestive tracts, crimson and purple, pulsing and writhing. All around the subsiding sub-organisms, the frozen air of Snowball briefly evaporated, evoking billowing mist.

And the dormant creatures of this place, feasting on this unexpected benison of warmth, enjoyed explosive growth: not just lichen-like scrapings and isolated flowers now, but a kind of miniature forest, trees pushing out of the ice and frosted air, straining for a black sky. Minda saw roots tangle as they dug into crevices in the ice, seeking the warmth of deeper levels, perhaps even liquid water.

But in no more than a few seconds it was over.

The ghost's innards were slumped and darkening. And where they fell away, they revealed something at the center: almost like a human body, she thought, slick with pale pink fluid, and curled over like a fetus. But it, too, was rapidly freezing.

The heat the ghost had hoarded for an unknown lifetime was lost to the uncaring stars. The small native forest was freezing in place for another millennium of dormancy, and the air began to snow out once more.

At last Minda fell.

But there was something beneath her now, a smooth, dark sheet draped over the ice. She collapsed onto it helplessly. A thick, stiff blanket stretched over her, shutting out the starry sky.

She wasn't warm, but she wasn't getting any colder. She smiled and closed her eyes.

When she opened her eyes again, the stars framed a Spline ship, rolling overhead, and the concerned face of her cadre leader, Bryn.

The Spline rose higher from the planet, and the site of Minda's crash dwindled to a pinpoint, a detail lost between the tracery of the abandoned city and the volcano's huge bulk.

"It was the motion of the vegetation that our sensors spotted," Bryn said. Her face was somber, her voice tired after the long search. "That was what drew us to you. Not your heat, or even your ghost's. That was masked by the volcano."

"Perhaps the ghost meant that to happen," Minda said.

"Perhaps." Bryn glanced at the ghost's hide, spread on a wall. "Your ghost was astonishing. But its morphology is a logical outcome of an evolutionary drive. As the sky turned cold, living things learned to cooperate, in ever greater assemblages, sharing heat and resources. The thing you called a silver ghost was really a community of symbiotic creatures: an autarky, a miniature biosphere in its own right, all but independent of the universe outside. Even the skin. . . . This is a new species. Evidently we have reached a point where two growing spheres of colonization, human and ghost, have met. Our future encounters will be interesting. . . ."

Now, as the chill horizon folded on itself, Minda saw the colony of the ghosts. It was a forest of globes and half-globes anchored by cables; gleaming necklaces swooped between the globes. The colony, a sculpture of silver droplets glistening on a black velvet landscape, was quite remarkably beautiful.

But now a dazzling point of light rose above the horizon, banishing the stars. It was a new sun for Snowball made by humans, the first of many

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fusion satellites, hastily prepared and launched. The ghost city cast dazzling reflections, and the silver globes seemed to shrivel back.

Bryn said, watching her, "Do you understand what has happened here? If the ghosts' evolution was not competitive, they are weaker than us."

"But the ghost gave its life to save me."

Bryn said sternly, "It is dead. You are alive. Therefore you are the stronger."

"Yes," Minda whispered. "I am the stronger."

Bryn eyed her with suspicion.

Where the artificial sun passed, the air melted, pooling and vaporizing in great gushes. O

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In a realm of absolute wealth and power, salvation will take more than clapping when . . .

TINKERBELL IS DYING

John Alfred Taylor

Ariston Stavrou turned over on his waterbed without breaching from his sleep, waking only when he found no one beside him. Where was his glowing girl? he wondered, why was it so dark? then he remembered that Tinkerbell was two rooms down the hall and deathly ill.

"Give me a little light," Stavrou whispered. The illuminator panel sandwiched in the tester of the bed came on, shining through gold-leaf veneer beaten so thin it was translucent purple.

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"And the time—" 0431 appeared in green.

"The view," he said. The numbers and the wall dissolved, to show the shadows of the villa garden, the surrounding row of cypresses, the old moon beyond like a sliver of a dead man's fingernail. "Opaque," Stavrou commanded, regretting he'd brought in the emptiness outside, and once again he was safe in his intelligent room.

"Lights out." Stavrou lay down again, adjusted the quilted silk comforter about him, ready to go back to sleep. But he remained all too awake, shifting repeatedly to find a more comfortable position, turning on his side, pushing his pillow away so he could lie prone with arms gathered under his chest, then turning on his back again. What if she should die?

"Show me Tinkerbell," he said. The house knew her location, and Stavrou supported himself on one elbow to view the wall display more comfortably. At the edge of the picture, the night nurse was half-drowsing over her book. Between the intravenous feeding standard and a blinking machine to register vital signs, Tinkerbell's shoulders, neck, and face shone by their own light, with her long black hair a halo on the pillow. She seemed to glow brighter now than when she was well, a woman of the palest jade, polished by sickness, though perhaps that was his imagination.

He watched the nurse start at a silent alarm, rising to check the numbers on the blinking machine, then lean over her charge for a moment before going back to the chair. Probably that meant no change.

Years ago, his English nanny had taken him to see *Peter Pan.* How hard he'd tried when the man had told him to clap and bring the actress playing Tinkerbell alive again! Then, Stavrou had believed. Whether in fairies or what people said, he didn't remember, but now he knew that there was no way that striking his palms together could cure the woman down the hall.

Waking Dr. Mokichi now would be pointless, because he'd be checking on Tinkerbell in less than two hours. Mokichi had worn himself out yesterday trying to help her, and deserved his last moments of sleep.

Stavrou wished he could join the doctor in oblivion, but felt too tense, so did the next best thing, ordering hot Darjeeling tea and fresh orange juice from the robobutler. Stavrou slipped into a peacock-colored robe while waiting, then decided to catch up with the news, and summoned his Bookgirl. The robobutler chimed, and the server detached itself from the wall and rolled to the edge of the bed, where it opened and extended the tray table at just the right height.

He was sipping his juice when the Bookgirl came in. "Sorry I took so long."

"Quite all right, my dear." Stavrou called her "my dear" because he couldn't remember her name—was it Marie? He usually called her Night after her shift, just as he called the one who came on later in the morning Day. The Bookgirl sat down on the further edge of the bed, pulled down a zipper on either side of her dress to reveal her entire back.

"Market report," Stavrou requested. "Closing values of my favorites on the Nikkei." Black letters and numbers appeared on the pale skin, the last stock quotes from Tokyo. Smart tattoos had been the natural progression after smart paper, but as far as he knew no one else had a living library.

Like paper, Night was only a medium: the microscopic beads embedded in the skin of her back showed either their black or white sides in response to

Illustration by June Levine

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wireless signals from the house, with the house able to draw from every digital library, databank, or newsfeed on the planet.

Once he had attempted to actually read Proust through, and kept Night and Day busy until he gave up in the middle of *Le Côté de Guermantes;* Stavrou was never sure whether he or they were more relieved.

"Reuters. Current news headlines."

Doctor Mokichi explained Tinkerbell's current status over breakfast on the terrace, slurping his miso soup while Stavrou dawdled over his omelet with black truffles. "At least her temperature remains the same—"

"That's good?"

"Absolutely. If it rose a degree or two, there could be brain damage. And the girl is very weak."

Stavrou almost choked on the bit of toast he'd been chewing, then washed it down with ice water. "So? Is there anything you can do for Tinkerbell?"

"One possibility. But you have to pass on it."

"Anything that helps."

Mokichi gulped more noodles. "Let me explain. As you remember, we used the same gene-engineered bacteria as ordinary tattoos."

"Gene-engineered? You told me it came from shrimp."

"Originally. But the bacillus had to be modified."

"Why?"

"The original strain killed the shrimp."

Stavrou's fork clattered on his plate. "Glow tattoos aren't dangerous."

"Not usually. Not with the weakened strain. Except that 80 percent of your girl's skin had to be infected to make her glow."

Stavrou wiped his mouth. "You said there's a chance to save her?"

"Definitely. A massive regimen of antibiotics should suffice. But afterward, she won't shine in the dark, won't be your Tinkerbell. Why I said you needed to agree to it."

"Give me a few minutes," Stavrou said, pushing his chair away from the table.

When Stavrou entered, the day nurse started to rise, but he put a warning finger to his lips, and walked over to stand beside Tinkerbell's bed. In the sunlight, he could see how hollow her cheeks were, and that her lips were cracked and dry. She was breathing hard. "Darken the room," he whispered.

A moment later, he looked down on the old Tinkerbell, all imperfections washed away by her luminescence. Except that he still heard the stertorous breathing.

He walked back to the terrace like an automaton. Mokichi gave him a questioning glance over his green tea.

Stavrou nodded. "Begin your antibiotics."

Day was sitting on the edge of his bed, her back dense with the numbers of Stavrou's wealth as he talked to his lawyer in Geneva. "Release Hertha Schmitt from her contract with full final payment immediately." (Goodbye, Tinkerbell.) "In Euros or Dollars US, whatever is trading highest."

"This moment?"

"This moment," Stavrou ordered. "And Neihardt—"

"Yes?"

"Start looking for a replacement." O

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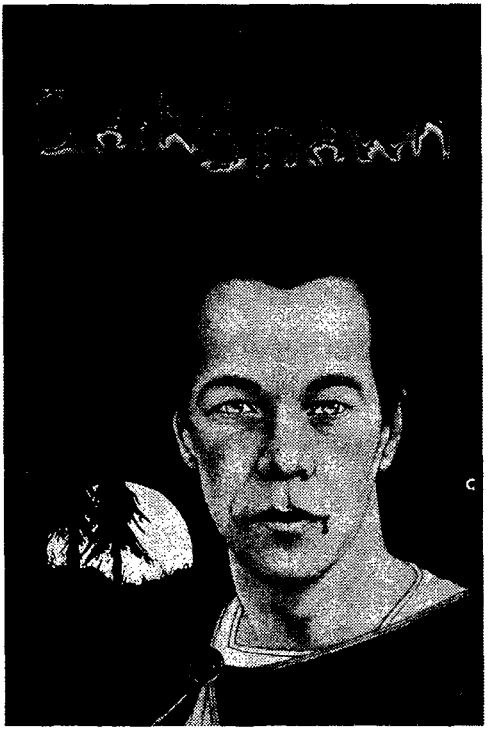

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THE ENCLAVE

Lois Tilton

Illustration by Laurie Harden

Lois Tilton's latest novel, the vampire fantasy *Darkspawn,* is just out from Hawk Books.

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—1—

It happened while Donner Yates was bringing up the team of horses so his dad could hitch them to the log. This was the second year he'd helped with the logging, and he loved how the air on the slope smelled so fresh and sharp, full of raw pine sap from the newly felled trees. Dad had to chop the branches off the trunk first before they could haul it down to the mill, but he was almost finished, so he told Donner, "Go get the team."

Donner never saw what happened. There was the steady *crack crack* of the axe chopping through the pine branches. Then a kind of a hoarse cry, like nothing he'd ever heard before—a man's scream. He dropped the leading reins and ran back to where he'd left Dad, and there he was on the ground, rocking back and forth, holding onto his leg. And his pants leg was all dark red with blood.

Donner wanted to help, but his father just gasped, "Run get Doc! Quick!" and Donner ran down the hill, as fast as he could, back to the settlement, not even thinking to unharness one of the horses to ride.

There were a couple of men also out logging on the slope, and Donner stopped just long enough to call out to them, "My Dad's hurt! Up there!" before he ran on.

It was a long way to go, but Donner ran without heeding the hot pain in his lungs, the knot under his ribs, praying, *Let Doc be home!* because he knew that a lot of the time she was out helping birth a baby or a calf or something. And Dad needed help *now!* But when Donner got to Doc's house, she was in her kitchen, boiling something on the stove that filled it with a sharp, medicinal steam.

He was too much out of breath to talk when he finally burst inside, but Doc could see that something was very wrong. She grabbed him by the shoulders, holding him up. "Just breathe. There. Now, who's hurt? Your mom? Your dad? Is it at home?"

Donner shook his head. He managed to gasp, "Dad . . . his leg . . . on the slope. . . ."

"He broke his leg? Cut it?"

"Cut it," Donner gasped. "The blood . . ."

"You'll have to show me where." Doc quickly took the pot off the stove, then went out to the back and got her horse saddled. She pulled Donner up behind her and kicked the horse into a run, and he hung on, calling to her, "Up on the north slope! Past the burned-out patch!"

People saw them, and Doc reined up to call out, "Nelson Yates is hurt up on the north slope! Somebody get a wagon!" Someone else, Donner knew, would tell his mom.

"How bad is it, son?" Doc asked him.

"There was a *lot* of blood!" His voice broke, remembering the pants leg soaked with it.

"Was that all you could see, the blood?"

Donner nodded, then realized she couldn't see him, behind her on the saddle. "Dad just told me to go get you, so I ran."

"Was anybody else with him?"

"I saw Mister Eicke, Mister Vincent. I told them." After a pause, "Doc, could my dad *die?*"

"I hope not." She sounded grim. He hung on tighter to her waist.

When they got to the place where it had happened, the two other men

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were there with his dad, and they looked awfully relieved to see Doc. They quickly stepped back from him as she grabbed her saddlebags off the horse and knelt down right next to Dad.

Doc cut off his pants leg while Mr. Eicke and Mr. Vincent looked away like they didn't want to watch, but no one stopped Donner from watching. There was a long open gash in Dad's thigh, and he could see bright red flesh and white broken bone and the blood still pumping out, spurting. Doc was working on it with a grim hard expression on her face, trying to get the bleeding to stop.

Soon someone came up with a wagon, and Mom was on the seat next to the driver. She ran up to Dad, but she stopped with a horrified gasp at the sight of him, the sight of all that blood. Then she grabbed hold of Donner and almost screamed again when she turned him around, and only then did he look down and see all the blood on his own clothes, from when he'd tried to help Dad.

Doc told her, "It'll be rough getting him back down to the settlement. Too much jolting will start the bleeding again." So it was Mom who held Dad as they drove the wagon down the slope, even though her face was almost as pale as his. They took him home, where Donner was shut out of the bedroom while Doc did what she could to try to save his father. He cried then, finally, standing outside the closed door, because he was afraid Dad might die.

Some of the neighbor women came into the house and saw him, stared at him in his bloodstained clothes, bit their lower lips, and shook their heads. They left Donner alone, but they rounded up the younger kids and took them out of the house. He knew they'd come back later with stew and cornbread and pie, the way they always did when there was a new baby or someone was sick. But Donner, left by himself, eased the bedroom door open and slipped inside.

Dad lay still on the bed with Mom and Doc standing on either side of him. There wasn't so much blood as Donner had expected, but Doc was holding Dad's wrist and staring at her watch. Then she put it down and looked at Mom. "I've got it stopped, but I think he's in shock from losing so much blood."

"You mean there's nothing you can do?" Mom asked anxiously.

"I didn't say that." After a moment, "A blood transfusion would be the best thing, but of course that's impossible."

Mom almost backed away, and the expression on her face said: *unclean!* "Isn't there anything else?"

"I'll do everything I can," Doc said. She turned to Donner, as if she'd known all along that he was there. "If you want to help, son, I need a bucket of water boiled. Can you do that?"

Donner ran to the well. When he came back with the bucket Mom saw him and made him go take off his bloodstained clothes, said it was unclean for him to be running around that way. She said something about burning them, too, but later she just boiled the stains out of them.

After Donner cleaned up he slipped back into the bedroom, and he saw that Doc had rigged up a jar on the bedpost, with a tube that ran down to Dad's arm. He stepped closer. "What is it?" he asked Doc in a whisper.

"Your dad lost a lot of blood, son. This will help replace it. Don't worry, it's not unclean, it's mostly just water, with a little salt, a little sugar, some other stuff."

Donner glanced at the bed. His dad's face looked gray and his lips were

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bluish dark. He wanted to cry again, but he remembered what Doc had said to his mom about what would be the best thing. "If my dad needs real blood, he can have some of mine."

Doc shook her head. "That's brave of you, son, but I don't know if I'd want to take the risk. The wrong kind of blood would be even worse for him." Then she took up Dad's arm again, the one that didn't have the tube in it, and put her fingers against his wrist.

But she didn't tell Donner to go away, and so he was there with Mom at the end when Dad died, despite everything that Doc could do.

After the funeral, things changed at home. Of course the neighbors and the church members promised to help, and they did, especially at first. Mom sold Dad's tools and the heavy team and got an old mare instead to pull the wagon. She sold his interest in the sawmill. Yet there was still a lot of work to be done at home, and Donner being the oldest boy, there was even talk about whether he ought to leave school. "To take his father's place," people said.

But Mom said No, he wasn't old enough to take on a man's work yet, and Donner was glad, because he really didn't want to leave school. Still, he had enough new chores to send him to bed every night with blistered hands and an ache in his back and missing Dad so much it was a hurt worse than all the rest.

That first day, when he stood confronting the axe in the woodshed, Donner was afraid. Afraid even to take it down off the rack. Of course Dad had taught him how to chop and split wood, but now after the accident all Donner could think of was seeing him on the ground with his leg laid open and bleeding, blood all over the axe blade. If it could happen to Dad . . .

But Mom wouldn't let him off. "It's got to be done," she told him, "and I can't be asking the Parkers to keep sending their boy over, when he's just a couple years older than you are."

Still, he could hear the worry in her voice, and Donner knew she was remembering the same thing he was: the sight of Dad bleeding to death. If he cried, he thought for a moment, she might give in, she might not make him do it after all. But Donner knew somehow that the time for crying had passed at Dad's funeral. He couldn't take his place yet, couldn't be the man of the house the way some of the neighbors kept saying—he wasn't quite twelve years old. But that was too old to cry, now.

And after a couple of weeks the axe got easier to use, his muscles didn't hurt so much any more, and the other pain wasn't always with him either, only surfacing at times like when the family sat down to dinner and he saw Dad's seat empty at the head of the table. He worked harder at school, too, not knowing how much longer he'd be able to stay there. Girls usually quit as soon as they could do a woman's work, and the boys left when the girls did, to work as apprentices in some trade, even though they weren't ready to do a grown man's job. School was just for young kids, and there was always more work in the settlement than there were hands to do it, work for boys and men alike.

One day about a month after the accident, when the weather was starting to turn cold, Donner's mom told him to take a wagonload of split stovewood over to Doc's house. That of course was payment for her treating Dad, even though it wasn't strictly necessary, but it was a matter of pride with her to pay what she could, and Donner made sure every piece he stacked in

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the wagon was good sound firewood. Mom even had to come out and tell him he was overloading the wagon.

"But it's for Doc!"

"Well, you come back for another load, then. I promised her two cords, but I'm not having you cripple the horse trying to haul so much all the way to Doc's place in one load."

Donner knew how Dad's team of heavy draft horses, Ned and Knobby, could have hauled two cords of firewood without breaking a sweat. That lame old mare Mom had gotten in trade for them was no good. It hurt to think of Ned and Knobby now. It'd been Donner's job to take care of the team when Dad was alive, and the big horses had followed him around the paddock like a pair of oversized dogs. But they were too valuable to keep and feed without working them, and so now they had broken-down old Dolly in the barn instead, and tending to her was part of his brother Steven's chores.

When he got there, Doc showed him where to unload and stack the wood, then offered him a piece of cake when he was done. "I'll bet you're hungry after all that work. It's quite a job for a boy your age. Are you working the timber now, like your father?"

With his mouth full of nut cake, Donner shook his head, then swallowed. "I'm still going to school."

"That's good to hear. But I know I don't have to tell you timbering's dangerous work. Is that what you're going to do when you're finished schooling? Apprentice at the sawmill, maybe?"

"I don't know. Mom sold Dad's share in the mill. I guess they'd take me on, though."

"Is it what you *want* to do?"

Donner prodded the cake with his fork. "I don't know."

"Well, what do you like?"

With a shrug, "Horses. Reading."

"You know, son—Donner, isn't it?—I'm not so young as I used to be, and I could use a boy around this place to take care of old Princess out there, do all the other chores. And if he wanted, he could learn more about horses and other stock, what to do about them if they were hurt or sick." She raised her eyebrows in a question.

"You mean, like doctoring them?"

"That's just what I mean. Interested?"

Donner bounced in his chair. "Yes!"

"It can be a dirty job, you know. Got to get down there in the shit and the pus and blood and all of it."

"I know, I still want to do it!"

"Talk to your mom, then."

And Mom had the same questions—did he know it could be a hard, dirty job? Was he sure it was what he wanted to do? But she finally told him he might as well see what it was like, before he decided. He had to apprentice somewhere in a year or so.

And Donner couldn't think of anywhere else he'd rather go. Mostly, at first, it was chores, just like he still had to do at home—stacking the firewood, mucking out the stalls, turning over the truck garden and chopping the weeds. But besides Princess and Artemisia, Doc's milch goat, there were stalls that sometimes held ailing animals, and Doc would let him watch while she treated them. If she put on a poultice, he had to learn what went

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into it and how to mix it up himself. It wasn't long before he was coming with her on calls, too, where he saw calves being born and held squirming he-lambs so Doc could apply the clamps that turned them into wethers instead of rams when they grew up.

The farmers saw him with her and said, "Good to see you've got yourself some help, Doc."

"Not as young as I used to be," she'd answer. "High time to be getting an apprentice."

"Kind of a young one, isn't he?"

"Well, it's a lot to learn, so best he get started."

Then there was a day when he went with Doc to sew up the leg of a horse that cut it on a fence wire, and she told him, "Hold on to that leg there, try to keep it still." And he did it, though the horse's cannon was slippery with blood, while Doc slipped her needle in and out of the edges of the jagged cut. When she was done, he stared at his hands, all red and sticky with blood, and he remembered how it was when Dad was hurt.

"We'd better go wash," was all she said, getting to her feet.

Doctoring sure involved a lot of washing hands, both before and after. While they were scrubbing off the blood, Doc asked him, "Does it bother you?"

Donner stared at his hands again, where there was still a faint residue of blood in the lines of his palms. He took the scrub brush to them. "I don't know. I mean, everybody says blood is unclean."

"Well, so is dirt, too, and shit. So what do you do if you get dirt or shit on your hands?"

He grinned, because other adults wouldn't use the word "shit" in front of a kid. "Wash it off?"

"That's right. Blood and shit and dirt are unclean and they might make you sick, and that's why we wash our hands and sterilize our instruments, so we won't pass them on to other people or animals. As long as we do that, blood really isn't dangerous, no more than dirt. But I want you to remember that if you're going to be a doctor, you're going to have blood on your hands. Human blood, too, not just horses and other animals. Think about that, before you make up your mind for sure if it's what you want to do."

Donner thought about it, looked at his dripping wet hands. "Then why do they say it in church?"

She sighed. Donner already knew that was one of those questions he wasn't supposed to ask, but this was Doc he was talking to. "Where do diseases come from?" she asked him in her teaching voice.

He knew that much already, everyone knew it. "Germs, those little things you can't see."

"Right. And on the Outside, they lived in sin and they had a lot of diseases, and those germs lived in people's blood. Like the plague. That *was* death. But a long time ago, we came here where we could live safe from the plague, and the preachers want people to remember that. '*We went to dwell apart.*' Do you understand?"

"I guess I do," he said finally, although he really didn't understand, because if disease came from germs, then what did it have to do with sin?

There were two reasons Donner didn't want to leave school yet. First were the books in the school library, although lately the medical books Doc gave him were a lot more interesting. The second reason was Grace Trusdale.

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Grace liked horses, too. She didn't like books and reading quite as much as he did, but she was the best at spelling and math in the whole school. And the prettiest girl, too, in Donner's eyes.

Donner's eyes were on Grace more and more often lately the next year after he started working for Doc. She was changing in very interesting ways. There was something in the way she walked that stirred strange sensations in him when he stared after her. Now, when the preacher at church started to go on about lust and sin, he squirmed uncomfortably in his seat, recognizing their nature at last. He knew that he lusted, with a vague but powerful yearning, after Grace Trusdale.

It was a scary thing, because he could see Grace was almost a woman and he was nowhere near ready to be a man. That was just the way it was, his mom told him. Girls grew up before boys did.

But suddenly, all around him there was lust, everywhere. When he went on his rounds with Doc, a stallion was covering a mare in Netter's farmyard, and Donner couldn't stop himself from staring at the size of the horse's thing, and the mare with her tail raised, presenting her rump, inviting the male. Donner almost disgraced himself, watching it, right there in front of Doc and the Netters.

Then in church that week, the text was: "*The wages of sin is death,*" and the preacher said, "And when you sin, when you harbor unclean lusts in your heart, then you're inviting death—eternal death—into your immortal soul!"

After the service, Donner asked, "Mom? If lust is a sin, why isn't it a sin when animals . . . how come that isn't wrong, but it's wrong when people do it?" It was embarrassing, asking his mom about that kind of thing.

"Because only people can sin," she told him, with a frown that made him certain she knew all about what had happened when he watched the stallion mount his mare, or what he did with himself inside the woodshed, alone. "That's why God sent the plague to punish people for their unclean ways. Animals can't understand God's commandments, so they aren't breaking them when they do what's natural. But God commands men and women to turn their backs on lust until they get married."

"So . . ."

"What?"

"So the same thing that's unclean if you're not married is all right when you are?" It was a revelation. All he had to do was marry Grace, then, and he'd never sin again!

That next year, the school had a community service project to reforest the burned-over part of the slope. For months, they'd grown and tended the thousands of seedling pines, and now it was time to plant them. It was the kind of clear spring day that could make even a boy like Donner eager to be outside and away from the classroom, and his little brothers were all wild, threatening to trample his newly planted seedlings as they ran up and down the slope, yelling like fiends. Miz Keller said their children and grandchildren would be logging these trees some day—if they survived. Donner wouldn't give much for the chances of his brother Wil's trees surviving.

But most of his attention now was on the plot next to his, where Grace was on her knees putting seedlings into the warm black earth and tamping it down around their roots. Donner worked his way in her direction, stabbing with his trowel into the soil to make a place for the new pines, but he

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couldn't help looking up to see how the cloth of Grace's overalls was pulled tight across her bottom as she bent over to reach for a new seedling. Lust made him careless at his work, and some of his trees were set into the ground at odd angles.

He didn't think she noticed him watching her, but when Miz Keller finally called a midday break and the children went to fetch their lunches, Grace grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the forested slope above where they were working. "Let's go up there to eat."

It was cool in the shade of the trees, and the branches muffled the noise from the younger kids, so they could imagine they were alone. They both had cheese and cornbread—Grace had blackberry preserves on hers, and she broke off a piece to share with him. The jam was tart-sweet and soaked into the bread.

"My father says I have to leave school after this year."

Donner wasn't surprised. "What will you do?"

"Work at home, I suppose. Until I get married." She made a face with her berry-stained tongue sticking out.

Donner looked at her, at the shape of emerging breasts beneath the fabric of her overalls, imagining Grace as a grown woman, married. She'd always been wild, a freckled rebellious redhead who liked to run and ride horses and climb down in the quarry for no reason other than it had been forbidden. But her father was strict, an Elder of the Witness Church, and not one to spare the strap, as the Bible advised godfearing parents to bring up their children.

"You're good at school stuff, you'd make a good teacher," he suggested.

"But Miz Keller is the teacher."

This was indisputably true, and why would the settlement want to support two teachers? Miz Keller didn't look very likely to die, and Donner didn't know what else to advise.

"What are you going to do?" she asked him in turn.

"I'm working for Doc."

"I mean, when you leave school."

"That's what I mean. I don't just do chores, I've learned a lot of horse-doctoring already."

"Really?" Her expression was aversion and envy both. Grace loved horses. But of course the Trusdales were Witnesses, and they were the worst about uncleanness and sin and things like blood and doctoring. "I wish I could go live up in the woods," she said suddenly. "All by myself. I'd catch squirrels to eat and cook them with wild mushrooms."

Donner knew she mostly said such things after a run-in with her father and his leather strap. Nevertheless, he offered, "I could go with you. I could cut down trees and build us a cabin."

"We'd go way past the boundary, where no one would ever come find us," Grace added wistfully.

"Past the *fence?*" It was an electric fence that enclosed the entire enclave and would kill anybody who tried to get past it. It was intended more to keep strangers out than prevent people from leaving, although as Donner recalled, if the Witnesses were right, maybe the plague had by now mostly wiped out human life in the rest of the world and there was no reason for the fence any more. But the rule still was: once you crossed the boundary, you were unclean, and could never come back.

Still, if he were with Grace, it might be worth it.

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Suddenly embarrassed by his own excessive sentiment, he picked up a big handful of pine needles and threw them at her. She shrieked and flung a handful of her own into his face. He scooped up another handful, but she leaped back out of his way. He gave chase, and it was in his mind to stuff them down her overalls, but when he finally tackled her they fell down together, almost on top of each other.

"I'm not supposed to let boys touch me," she said, panting for breath, but she didn't pull away, and there was something in her voice that dared him. "Boys are full of the devil."

Donner felt that unmistakable stirring in his groin, the devil rousing himself, answering to his name. He *wanted* to touch her, wanted to put his hands down her overalls, pull them down and take them off her, wanted to sin with her in all kinds of unthinkable ways.

"If a boy tries to touch me," she went on, watching for his reaction, "I'm supposed to slap his face, and scream."

He was almost sure that she'd do no such thing. But then girls were unpredictable. He reached out slowly to the pine needles stuck in her tangled red hair and pulled them out with his fingertips, one by one. And she didn't slap him, or scream, either.

But a few days later Donner's mom confronted him. "What's this about you and Grace Trusdale?"

"Nothing!" Donner protested, but a guilty flush colored his face, and Mom put her hands on her hips, the way she always did when she caught him denying what he'd done.

"Well, Elder Trusdale certainly doesn't think it's nothing! He threatened to come after you with a horse whip and thrash the skin off your backside. And if you don't tell me this minute what happened, I may just do the same!"

Now Donner was really scared—not of what his mom might do, she never really hurt him with her yardstick, but Elder Trusdale and his horse whip were another matter. "Honest, Mom, I didn't do anything! Grace and me were just having lunch together, away from all the little kids!"

"Miz Keller said she couldn't find you two anywhere. She said when you finally showed up, you were all covered in pine needles, like you'd been rolling in them."

"We were just playing around! We threw the needles at each other, that's all! I didn't *touch* her, Mom. Not like that, not like Elder Trusdale thinks."

Mom's lips pressed together tightly, in a way that used to scare him when he was a lot younger. But now Donner was suddenly and uncomfortably aware that he was looking at her straight on, eye to eye, as tall as she was, too big for her to bend over the kitchen table.

Maybe she saw it, too, herself. After a moment, she let her breath out. "Well, then, maybe it's just as well you won't be seeing so much of that girl from now on. The Trusdales are taking her out of school."

No! "Grace? Leaving school? Now?"

Her eyes narrowed. "And maybe it's time for you to be leaving, too. Doc says she can use you full-time, whenever you're ready."

"No!" Donner protested.

But the next day Mom went to talk to Miz Keller, who told her he'd already learned just about everything she had to teach, and Donner was really a good boy, she was sure, but she didn't have time for *that* kind of trouble in her school. So it was settled, whether Donner liked it or not.

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That night, he snuck into the Trusdales' yard, to see if he could find Grace and talk to her, just for a minute. He wanted to know if she was all right, if her father'd been using the strap on her.

But the Trusdales' dogs came after him and sent him back across the fence with a new rip in the leg of his pants.

—2—

Donner left his horse tied to a stunted sycamore and climbed up to the top of the ridge. The wind hit him, snatching at his hat as he reached the crest. It smelled wild and clean, filling his lungs with an exhilarating rush. Donner stood in awe at the expanse of empty land stretching out beyond the enclave's boundary, all the way out to nowhere. The grass rippled in the wind. Turning his head to scan the limits of the horizon, he could see now that what he'd read in the schoolbooks was true: how vast the world was, beyond anything he could have imagined.

It was Grace he wished he could bring up here, to show her all this, stand here on the ridge with her hand in his, with the wind blowing her red-brown curls. *Remember when we were going to run away together, out past the boundary where they couldn't find us?* Instead he pulled out his dad's old binoculars from their battered case and scanned the plain, the ostensible reason he'd climbed up to the ridge in the first place.

Donner knew it was her father who'd made sure he was sent out here to the boundary patrol, to get him away from her. Elder Trusdale had the influence to arrange that kind of thing. But the fact was, young unmarried men were expected to do community service, to make sacrifices for the common good. With their wild blood and their lusts, they were the most expendable part of the settlement, if someone expendable was needed, if there was a dirty or dangerous job to be done. Doc, though—Doc was almost spitting nails, she was so furious.

But Donner found that he didn't actually much mind it up here, except for missing Grace. Who could regret the opportunity to see beyond the boundary of the enclave, to see the horizon open, and the wide black nights full of stars?

He adjusted the binoculars to scan the landscape visible from his position on the ridge. A distant dustcloud on the plain caught his attention. He focused on it, the brown mass of movement, until he could make out the distinct image of a single bison running slightly ahead of the cloud. Fascinated, he watched the herd, saw it gradually slow to a halt, the dust dissipated by the breeze as the great shaggy beasts stopped and began to graze. He managed to count almost forty of them.

They were miles away, he couldn't tell exactly how far, the way distances could fool you out here. The herd wasn't so close that it could be a real threat to the enclave, he didn't think. Bison could break through fence, even electric fence—that's what they said, anyway. And according to Doc, they carried disease that could infect the cattle. Like all the things of the Outside world, they were unclean.

Donner glanced back down, but the growth down the slope hid the tree where he'd tied his horse, with the rifle holstered on his saddle. He knew they'd have to keep track of the herd's movements, but he hoped they wouldn't have to shoot the big shaggy beasts if they broke though. It would

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be almost a sin to have to kill such magnificent creatures, to let the meat go to rot on the other side of the fence, untouchable for fear of disease.

Finally, reluctantly, he climbed back down to where his horse was waiting, tail switching slowly at flies in the warm lowering sun. A few hundred yards away the fence marked the enclave's boundary. He rode up to it, saw that the electric wire was intact, and moved on along the section of fenceline he was supposed to be checking the breaks in the wire.

Here and there the carcass of some animal lay next to it, electrocuted, he supposed. Jackrabbits. A coyote. Crows, and a heap of feathers that might have been an eagle. Nothing nearly as large as a man. If he looked back up from the top of the next hill, he could see one of the windmills that generated the power. There were windmills all along both the north and south ridges, where the prevailing westerlies kept them turning almost constantly. On each windmill there was a siren that the patrol could turn on to alert the settlement in case intruders ever tired to cross the boundary. Twice a year, the patrol tested them, and the kids always came pouring out of the schoolhouse when they heard the sound, to the great irritation of Miz Keller, who hated the excuse for an interruption. But the children of the enclave stood firm for tradition and always ignored her frantic orders to sit back down in their seats and get on with their work.

In the Outside world, Donner knew, before the plague, the entire world had run on electricity, boundless supplies of it from powerful fusion generators. He wasn't sure, not exactly, what a fusion generator was or how it worked, except that it caused fatal defects at the genetic level of organisms, which might have contributed to the virulence of the plague, mutating it. That much he did understand, from Doc's medical books: about DNA and genes and mutation. The enclave's population was small, not much more than a thousand souls, and inbreeding was always a potential problem.

There was argument, sometimes, in the settlement about diverting more electric power from the fence to other uses. It was one of the issues that kept the churches divided, because the Guardians were adamant about keeping uncleanness outside the enclave, and wouldn't agree to anything that would weaken the barrier. But now that Donner had actually seen the fence, he had to wonder how much of a obstacle it could have ever been. He just couldn't see a man walking right into it and zapping himself dead. Or something the size of a bison.

But that was another one of those things you weren't supposed to question. Not when you were eighteen, unmarried, with no responsible position in the community.

Donner finished riding his assigned section of fence, then headed back to camp, coming in just as the sunset was glorifying the western horizon with broad sweeps of color. You just couldn't see a sunset like that down in the valley. The campfire was already burning, with a savory aroma of woodsmoke and cured meat wafting into the air from the kettle suspended over the coals. Elder Lewis looked up to give him a sour look. Donner was late, leaving Lewis to start on the camp chores by himself. Donner felt guilty about wasting time up on the ridge, but he said nothing while he saw to his horse and took the short-handled axe to cut more firewood for the night.

Neither of them spoke until they were sitting next to the campfire, plates of stew on their knees. Then Lewis said curtly that he'd found the break in the wire, fixed it. Donner reported sighting the bison herd. "They weren't heading this way, though, when I saw them. They were miles off."

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Lewis nodded, chewing the tough cured meat in the stew. He was one of the regulars on the boundary patrol, had spent years out here riding the fenceline. The shifts ran a month at a time, in all kinds of weather, except when the snow blew down out of the mountains and piled up in drifts high enough to bury a man. Supposedly, then, the winter itself was enough to hold the uncleanness back, when the fence lay under the drifts and the winter gales had brought down the wire all along the line.

As he spooned down the last of the congealing stew from his plate, Donner said, "I suppose I ought to learn how to fix the wire myself?"

Elder Lewis frowned. "I thought you were that boy supposed to be apprenticing with Doc."

"Well, not so it keeps me from having to come up here, I guess I'm not." There was enough bitterness in his tone that Lewis gave him a suspicious look.

Finally, "A fool can get himself killed with electricity, and that's a fact."

"Then I ought to learn to do it right, shouldn't I?"

Lewis snorted. "Don't they teach you kids anything useful at school?"

"There's a book, but it's on the reserved shelf." Donner had always meant to read it, but after a while his studies with Doc had become more important, though Miz Keller had let him take out any book he wanted, even after he left school.

"Well, I guess you'd better learn, then, if you're going to be coming up here regular. You watch me the next time, I'll show you. Doing is better than book-learning, and that's a fact."

Donner nodded without agreeing. It was what the elders in the settlement always said. Kids in school learned to read and write and figure basic math while they were kept out of the way of making trouble, then they went on to apprentice at a trade when they were old enough to be some use, learning by doing in the old tradition. But Donner liked books.

The sunset died into night, and he piled more wood onto their fire. It got cold out here when night came. Lewis got up stiffly and walked outside the light to relieve himself behind a tree, then rolled up in his sleeping bag. Donner left the fire's warmth reluctantly to do the same. It was sinful for a man to expose himself to another man.

Thinking of sin led to thoughts of Grace. Not that he saw much of her these days, ever since they both left school. The Witnesses were opposed in principle to too much schooling, to learning about the unclean world outside the enclave. As if it was a sin just to know it was there.

Sin and uncleanness—they were the same thing. Sin was lust, and lust was part of a man's nature, which was why men had to marry, and as soon as possible. Donner at eighteen was full of lust and too old to have it beaten out of him anymore. But Donner had turned down Marthie Ellen Partridge when they proposed her to him. He knew he could have been in a soft bed with Marthie Ellen right now, exercising his physical needs in a lawful married state, instead of outside on this hard ground, squirming restlessly in his sleeping bag. But it was Grace Trusdale he wanted, Grace he lusted for every night, sinfully, uncleanly, in the dark.

Here in the border camp, though, with Elder Lewis on the other side of the fire, lust took on an *unnatural* sense: the foulest, the most deadly of all sins, although the mechanics of the actual deed were rather unclear in Donner's mind. A man with another man—what would they do? The possibilities were all unthinkable. He knew full well the reason he'd been partnered

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with Lewis on this patrol, a church Elder who was armored in righteousness and old age against any manifestation of fleshly need. Young men weren't to be trusted in general, young *unmarried* men most of all.

Still, the thought of lusting after Elder Lewis . . .

Donner stifled his laughter. It wasn't really funny. He knew he had a bad reputation in the settlement, for refusing to marry Marthie Ellen, for apprenticing with Doc. And that old business with Grace, like it was some kind of scandal, two kids sneaking away to play in the woods. He wasn't the kind of man Elder Trusdale wanted his daughter to marry.

He turned over and looked up at the sky to distract himself with the glory of the stars. Down in the valley with the horizons cut off, you never saw the sky this way, the whole vast sweep of it. The moon—the books said men had walked up there once, before the plague.

Not far from it there seemed to be a strange kind of star, with a light that appeared to be blinking on and off. As he watched, it seemed to move. Yes, it was definitely moving!

Excited, Donner crawled out of his bag to get his binoculars. The image resolved into a linear array of lights, and as he focused the lenses he could make out a pale form against the night sky, almost like a soaring bird. He could hardly believe what he was seeing, like a picture out of a book: an airplane. How far away did it have to be, how high, to be so small?

He looked up again, bare-eyed, and then with the binoculars.

Elder Lewis stirred on the other side of the fire. "What's all the fuss?"

"Look!" Donner exclaimed, pointing.

"Hmph. A ship full of plague," the old man said sourly.

"But those are people up there!"

Lewis was unimpressed. "Seen them before. As long as they don't come here, can't hurt anything."

But Donner couldn't stop staring, not even after the plane had passed across the sky, out of sight. Only this afternoon, when he'd first climbed up to the top of the ridge, he'd marveled at the emptiness of the horizon and even wondered if the enclave held the only human beings surviving in the wake of the world-wide plague, the way some of the Witnesses claimed. Now he knew better. There were other people alive out there. Not only still alive, but capable of flight across that whole vast stretch of sky, and beyond, further than he could see.

The wonder of it made him shiver in the cool night breeze, but Elder Lewis was already snoring again.

The day after next, there was another break in the wire somewhere along the perimeter. It just took one break, and the electricity went out the whole length of the fence. The patrol had to constantly be checking to make sure the current was still live, and now they had to ride out to find where the break was. Elder Lewis muttered what sounded like curses under his breath as they saddled up. Donner had to wonder: if there were this many interruptions, how many days out of the year was the fence actually working at all?

They split up, each of them riding in a different direction, looking for the breach. The fence kept four men, out of the whole enclave, constantly on patrol. Lewis and Donner rode the northern boundary, and another pair of men was assigned to the south.

As Donner rode along the fence's length, the day grew warmer, with flies

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coming to settle on his horse's ears and sweaty neck. He took the animal down toward a shallow stream to drink, but even before he got to the water he saw the tracks in the mud, the unmistakable split hooves of cattle. Only he knew there were no cattle this close to the boundary, and he realized these must be the tracks of the bison, broken through the fence.

Donner pulled out his rifle and fired it into the air twice in quick succession, a signal to Lewis that he'd located the break. Then, after a brief hesitation checking the tracks to see what direction the bison were heading, he set off after them. It was no trouble to trail the herd, even after they climbed up out of the soft ground, the way their hooves had trampled the grass. He trailed them up another ridgeline, out of the trees, where he caught sight of Lewis a mile or so to the west and shot off another signal, hoping the two of them could converge on the animals on the other side. The bison either had to be driven from the enclave or killed before their diseases could infect the settlement's cattle.

What Donner hadn't counted on was the effect of his shots on the herd. Before he'd covered half the distance to Lewis, there was a rumbling sound of hooves, and almost a dozen of the animals came charging over the crest of the ridge. The shaggy brown beasts were wild-eyed, blowing foam from their nostrils as they swept past Donner and on down the slope toward Lewis. He was too awestruck at the sight to react, to get off a shot at them.

The stampeding bison swerved at the sight of the other rider, but Lewis's horse reared back in surprise, and Donner saw the Elder lose his balance and start to slide from his saddle.

When Donner got there, Lewis was on the ground, holding his lower leg. Under the old man's tanned skin, his face was bloodless with pain.

"Let me look," Donner insisted, taking his knife from his belt. He was going to have to cut off Lewis's boot and pants leg to get at the injury. At least there wasn't any blood. The memory of the day his dad had died was suddenly so strong he could almost smell the pine sap up here on this treeless ridge.

The Elder started to protest, but Donner paid him no mind. "You know I'm studying with Doc, I know what to do."

"At least there's no blood, no blood," Lewis kept saying as Donner went to work on the boot, trying to cut along the seam. A good pair of boots was too valuable to ruin.

Lewis's exposed leg was pale and hairy, with obvious swelling and distortion below the knee. But as he'd said, no blood. Donner probed the place, tried to straighten it, stopping when Lewis made a sharp intake of breath.

Kids in the settlement were always falling, breaking arms and legs. Donner had helped Doc set them more than once. But old bones were different, Doc had always said, old bones were brittle, would snap where younger bones could take it. Donner had never set a broken limb on his own. He knew he was going to have to do it, though, before Lewis could be moved.

Fortunately, Stef Milan came riding up about then, having heard the shots from the other side of the valley. It was lucky he was so close nearby. Donner explained the situation. "I got to set it, but I'm afraid it's going to hurt."

"Do it, boy," said Lewis. "Do what you got to."

Donner bit his lip, but there was no help for it. So he did what he had to do, with Milan's help, got the leg straightened and splinted and wrapped to immobilize it, just the way Doc had taught him. They managed together to

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get Lewis carried back to their camp, but there was no way the old man could ride back down to the settlement, not with that broken leg.

"You can go and bring back Doc with a wagon," Milan told Donner. "Corbin and I'll take care of the fence and the rest of that bison herd."

But Doc was busy attending a tricky childbirth. She came out of the birthing room to talk briefly with Donner. "Either Lewis will have to wait till I can make it up there, or you can bring him down by yourself. It's not a compound fracture, is it?"

Donner said it wasn't. "Then you can just go back and bring him down. It won't be an easy trip, but that goes without saying. The main thing is to keep the limb immobilized. You know all this."

In the meantime, Miz Lewis had heard about the accident and was already packing to go fetch her husband. She wasn't happy to see that it was Donner who'd be going with her and not Doc herself, but Donner explained about the birth as he helped her up onto the seat of the wagon.

"Well, I suppose." The Elder's wife had borne eight children and knew about the problems you could have with births. She took a breath after Donner handed her up onto the wagon seat. "Well, so you're the Yates boy, are you? Doc's apprentice?"

"Yes, Miz, that's me. When I'm not on boundary patrol."

She peered at him, as if she was trying to recall what scandals attached to his name. "I hear you're marrying the little Partridge girl?"

He shook his head. "No, Miz. That didn't work out."

She *tsked* disapprovingly. "A young man like you needs to be married. A well-grown young man like you."

"Yes, Miz, I do hope to be, soon. To someone else."

She grabbed the seat as the wagon jounced over a rut. "Sorry," Donner said. "But it'll be a rough ride all the way up to the boundary. As bad on the way back, too, I'm afraid. I'll drive as slow as I can, for his sake, of course. But there's no roads up there, you know."

The Elder's wife sighed sharply. "The old fool! I told him, he's past the age to go out there riding patrol, sleeping on the cold ground. With his joints! You should hear him getting out of bed on a winter morning! He doesn't have to go up there, you know. At his age, with his position in the community. He volunteers! He says nobody else understands the electricity. But some things are best left to the young—young men like you."

"Yes, Miz."

While they drove up to the camp, Miz Lewis had a lot more to say about her husband's foolishness, his stubborn ways, the state of his joints. Then she interrogated Donner on his marriage plans, his mother's health, and the health of all his relatives.

"I remember when they brought your father back home, with his leg cut half off. What a day! I remember I saw him in the wagon with your mother and Doc, all covered with blood." She shuddered. "And you were there with them, too, weren't you? Just a little fellow, and your clothes were all bloody, too."

She looked worried for a moment. "You're sure that the Elder—"

"No, Miz, there wasn't any blood. It was a simple break."

"Thank the Lord for that, at least!" She sighed heavily. "He was a fine man, Nelson Yates. A real loss to the community. And he left young children." She looked at Donner again. "They say you'd run all that way to fetch

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Doc. And now you're apprenticing with her. Well, I have to say, I don't quite understand why a young man would want to do . . . *that* as his life's work, but we'd all be poorly off without Doc, and that's a fact, I don't care what anyone says."

Donner said nothing. The more he'd learned about doctoring, the more he was convinced his father could have been saved that day six years ago, if only people hadn't been afraid to get his blood on their hands. Mr. Vincent, Mr. Eicke—they were there, they could have helped. Should have helped, more than they did, somehow. He could remember how they'd looked away from him, away from Dad as he lay dying on the ground, so they couldn't see the blood.

At least he didn't think Elder Lewis was likely to die now, though how well he'd be able to walk again was another question.

When they got up to the camp, Miz Lewis jumped down from the wagon almost before he had it stopped, without waiting for him to help her. "Oh, you old fool! Look what you've done to yourself!"

Lewis grumbled something and made as if he wanted to pull away. "Don't go wrenching it all over again, woman!"

When Donner looked at the old man and his wife, it made him imagine Grace Trusdale holding him that way and calling him an old fool, fifty years from now. That's what getting married meant, he supposed. You had to get old, but it might be all right if you had someone to share it like those two did.

The next day he drove his patient back down to the settlement and delivered him to Doc, with Miz Lewis riding in the wagon bed to help cushion the broken leg against the jolting. He stayed, watching closely while Doc resplinted the knee and commented that he hadn't done all that bad, considering. Then he went to see his mom, who already knew he was back and had made him a big lunch of his favorite hotcakes, with jam.

Afterward, he went over to the Trusdale place, but when Miz Trusdale came to the door she informed him curtly that Grace was "away for a few days."

Donner hid his disappointment, well aware that "away for a few days" was how the members of the Witness sect referred to a woman's unclean time. "I hope you'll tell her I called while she was gone," was all he could say, even while he wondered if Grace's mother was telling the truth.

He wandered back toward Doc's place out of habit and found her out in the garden with a hoe. "Here, let me do that," he said, taking it from her.

"Why, do you think I'm too old to be digging my own garden?" He shrugged with a grin, but she let him keep the hoe. "Well, I am! I'm almost sixty-four years old, my joints ache in cold weather, and I should be sitting back in my rocker at the stove, drinking tea!"

He laughed. "You'd never last a day in a rocker!"

She glared at him. "No, one day I'll just sit down and die. And then where will you be? Out riding around in the mountains, breaking your legs, I suppose, like that fool Ned Lewis."

He leaned on the hoe, glancing up past the distant slope, where the trees hid the horizon from view. "It's not so bad, you know, Doc. I kind of like it up there, actually."

"That's not the point, whether you like it. The point is, I need a full-time apprentice, this settlement needs doctoring, and you need to learn a lot more before you're ready to take over. The point is, you should be here help-

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ing me and learning, not up there wasting your time riding fence." She looked at him sharply. "That is, if you're sure."

"I'm sure! You know I am! But the Elders don't see it that way, Doc."

"The Elders can see how they like what I'm going to say at the next Meeting. Why don't they send me up to ride fence if they don't think this community should be supporting a doctor? See how they like it the next time one of them breaks a leg down here while I'm gone!"

This time Donner didn't dare laugh at her. She only came up to his shoulder these days, and he could have lifted her with one hand—and she would have brained him with the hoe if he'd tried it. All his life he'd heard Doc calling herself "old," but now when he looked at her he realized, she *was* old. And one day sooner or later she was really going to die, and he'd miss her so much, maybe even more than he'd miss his mom. "You're right," was what he said, "you've got to make them see sense."

But a moment later, "You know, up there on the ridge, a couple nights ago, you know what I saw? An airplane. Really! It had lights, and I could see it as clear as a star. Doc, there are people Outside! Flying in airplanes!"

She gave him a different look, curious. "Did you really ever think there weren't?"

"Hell, Doc, how would I know? All the churches preach something different. Witnesses say everyone Outside is dying of plague, Guardians think they're ready to break through the fence and wipe us out." He thought a moment. "So when was the last time you ever saw people from Outside, anyway?"

"The year sixty-three."

Donner calculated rapidly. "But that would have been before you were born?"

"2063 was the last time anyone here in the enclave saw people from Outside. It's in the records."

"Tell me!"

"Come in the house, I'll show you. You're my apprentice, it'll all be yours someday."

While they waited for the tea to cool, she went into the back room and came back with an armload of old notebooks. When she set them down on the table, the dust made her sneeze.

"Doc Bonnhauer started these records, he was the original doctor for the settlement. It seems that after a few years, like ten or twelve years, they started to run out of supplies—like pain drugs, other things. Life got harder than they'd expected, and some families started to talk about leaving. Some of them did leave.

"Well, it seems a group decided to trade with the Outside for things they thought they needed, to keep more people from deserting the settlement. They took wagons and drove to a town named Parish, and they came back with the supplies. I guess they went back a few times more. Then, in the year sixty-three, they brought back a disease. The Elders refused to let them back into the enclave. There was a fight—gunfight, I mean. Two men were killed. Seven families left—whether they wanted to or not, I'm not sure.

"After that, there was no more talk of having anything more to do with the Outside. People learned to do without the things they used to think they needed. Electricity for the fence took priority. And mostly, things here haven't changed much since."

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"It was the plague? What they brought back?"

She shook her head. "No, it couldn't have been. The plague takes years to show symptoms. That's what made it so bad, you see, because it didn't kill people right away, so they could live with it for years and be passing it to others all that time. And they just made it worse with drugs to keep them alive even longer, except the disease was still there in their blood."

"Doc? Tell me, was it really God's punishment for sin? I mean the plague?"

She cleared her throat. "Well, I can't say about that. I know the preachers will say so, but sometimes I wonder who they are to know God's Will. What I do know is: sin, sexual sin, is just about one of the best ways there is to spread a disease from one person to another. And people Outside, back in those days, were sinning an awful lot. But then the plague started to spread to the innocent people, too. There was no stopping it. Every time they thought they had a cure or a vaccine, it would mutate. It may not have been God's Will, but it sure looked like it, then.

"Here in this enclave, though, we're safe from all that, from any kind of sickness or disease."

Only Donner couldn't help adding to himself: *As long as we don't ever leave.*

Less than a week after Donner came back from his stint on patrol, Doc called up to him while he was on his mom's roof replacing cracked shingles. She told him the Elders were going to take up the question of his apprenticeship at their next meeting.

"You mean it?"

"Why would I come all this way to say it if I didn't mean it? You know I've been trying to push this through for the last two years. At least you've got Lewis on your side now." She laughed conspiratorially. "I got the feeling that someone had given him a misleading impression of your character, before you went out on patrol."

Donner didn't have to ask who that might be. The Witnesses were the second largest church in the enclave, and, like Elder Trusdale, they sometimes treated everyone else in the settlement as if they were unclean. Lewis, as an Elder of the Guardians, wasn't likely to appreciate that, no.

When he finished with the roofing, Donner washed up and put on a clean shirt, then went to see if he could find Grace to tell her the news. Unfortunately, on his way to the Trusdale place, he had to run into Marthie Ellen Partridge and two of her sisters, who crossed to the other side of the road when they saw him. Donner cursed under his breath as he saw them whispering to each other, with significant hostile glances in his direction. It hadn't been his idea to hurt Marthie Ellen, and it wasn't his fault that she had a face like unbaked dough and nobody else wanted to marry her, either.

At the Trusdale place, Grace was outside, taking dry laundry off the line. Her shirt was a little damp with sweat, and it clung to her breasts. Donner stopped to watch as she reached up to the line. His lustful, sinful male nature responded, even more as she bent to put the folded clothes into the woven basket.

He came up behind her, tried to put his arm around her waist, wanting so much to hold more of her, but she struck his hand away. "Don't!"

"No one's looking."

"How do you know?"

Donner took his hands away. "I remember when you didn't mind."

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"We were kids. We didn't care what people thought. And you know what happened when my father found out."

Which, of course, made Donner's face heat. Those had been the days when they were going to run away together and live in a cabin in the woods. It'd always been her idea more than his, but, of course, her father blamed Donner's bad influence.

Well, at least she was right that they weren't kids any more. "Grace, I saw Doc today. She says the Elders are finally going to meet about my apprenticeship. You know what that means."

But she took a step away from him, frowning. "You're really going to do it? Apprentice with Doc?"

"You know I've been studying with Doc for six years now! That's what I want to do! We *talked* about it, Grace!"

"When we were kids, maybe. But that was about doctoring horses. Animals. Not . . . people."

"What difference does that make? The point is, we can get married now! You can get away. I thought that's what you *wanted!*"

"I just don't know. Look, I don't have time to talk about it now, all right? I have to get these clothes off the line."

"Grace!"

"Just *go,* will you?"

He backed away, hurt and confused. Someone must be watching her from the house, that was it, he finally decided. She was afraid of her father.

But it shouldn't have made such a difference. She should have been glad to hear the news.

Doc started off the meeting by standing up to speak as soon as the prayers were over.

"You all know, Donner Yates has been studying with me already for quite a while now, and I can't remember a young person with more aptitude and desire for medicine. But it takes years of study and training before a doctor is ready to be on his own. I'm not a young woman anymore, as you can all see. I don't want to leave this settlement without decent medical care when I die, which is what will happen if he keeps getting called away all the time for community service!"

Elder McSwade of the Witnesses stood up next, and Donner got a nervous feeling in the bottom of his throat. "Now, I don't say that I'd want a son of mine to do it, but Doc's right, this settlement needs a doctor. But here we see a young man, a strong, healthy young man. For six years, he's received the support of this whole community—and not begrudged it to him, mind you, because we all know his father was a hardworking man and what happened to him could happen to any one of us. Now this boy is grown, and ready to shoulder his part of the responsibility, to become a useful, *productive* member of the community. I'm sure you all see my point. We're already supporting one doctor, and I'm not saying that's too much of a burden, we all know how hard Doc works, and she's saved lives, I'm the first to admit it. But now she's asking us to support both her and this young man as her official apprentice, and I want to ask: can we really afford to do this? Can't young Donner here learn enough about doctoring without shirking his responsibilities to the community?"

A few voices were raised in agreement, but Elder Lewis cleared his throat loudly enough to get everyone's attention from his seat, because he was still

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on crutches. "Now, when I broke my knee up there at the fenceline, I was lucky young Donner was nearby, and that's a fact. He did all right by me when Doc couldn't come herself, but what happened to me could have been a lot worse, and *then* what? I've been thinking about that a lot, all that time stuck in bed with nothing better to do. Thinking about how much trouble we'd all be in without somebody who knows how to do doctoring. Just how many of you would be here today, whole and sound, without Doc? People are always going to need doctoring, and that's a fact. And Doc says there's a lot to learn before you can do it all, and I believe her. I say we can't afford to get along without somebody who knows what he's doing when you have a broken leg—or worse."

There was a murmur of agreement to that, too, which heartened Donner quite a bit. Then Elder Zumbrock stood, looking embarrassed, the way women always did when they had to bring up certain subjects in the presence of men. "Maybe it's all well and good, what you say, but there's another thing to consider. Now, I'm not saying anything against Donner here, not personally, but I'd like you all to remember that a lot of Doc's calling is to help at births, and, well, he's a young man, as you can all see. Some of our women have said they just wouldn't be comfortable with a man, well, in that position. Especially a *young* man like he is. And unmarried!"

Doc stood up again, and Donner knew she was mad. "Let me tell you all something. Almost forty years ago I had to stand here in this same room and listen to the Elders try to tell me I couldn't apprentice to my own dad because I was a *woman!* Doctoring was a man's work, was what they said. It was too unclean a business for a woman, they said. There'd never been a woman doctor in the settlement, they said.

"And now here you are telling Donner he can't be a doctor because he *isn't* a woman! Well, you just show me the young woman who wants to do it! You show me the girl who's looking to get her hands all bloody up to the elbow, not just birthing babies, but calves and foals, and even cutting off legs if need be. Forty years ago, that girl was me, but I don't see her out there today. It's Donner I see, and he's shown me he has what it takes to do the work.

"But he needs more study, and he needs training, and he needs experience, which he has to get by *doing* the work, while I'm still around to show him how to do it right. And I'm almost sixty-five years old, and any day now some horse is going to kick me in the head, and the people in this settlement are going to be asking why they don't have a trained doctor to birth the babies and take out an appendix and patch up their kids when they fall down out of a tree and break their heads."

Elder Lewis muttered, "Amen," but Zumbrock wasn't so easily argued around.

"Well, you may be right, and I won't say we don't need a doctor, and maybe an apprenticeship isn't a bad thing, as you say. But none of this alters the fact that Donner Yates is a young man, just eighteen years old, I think, and *not even married.* Think of our women, our mothers giving birth! Think how they'd feel! We all know what a man's nature is!"

McSwade was quick to pick up the attack. "And we all know what the scriptures say. A man's got to have a wife, otherwise his lusts are nothing but trouble to him and his neighbors." Then he scowled, "Or people have to wonder if there maybe isn't something *unnatural* about him."

Zumbrock lost no time in adding, "And I know for a fact that there was a match offered, and he wouldn't have the girl. Just wouldn't have her."

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Now Donner's face was burning with embarrassment, even all the way to the tops of his ears. But he stood up to declare himself. "I do mean to get married. Only I couldn't do it until the apprenticeship was settled. I can't marry a wife if I can't keep her and give her a home."

"Not my girl, you're not!" Elder Trusdale shouted from across the room. "I won't have any daughter of mine marrying a man with unclean hands!"

But Elder Foster, presiding, banged with his gavel to bring them to order. "This is clearly a private matter, not the business of the Elders, and it has no place in this discussion. Now, if the rest of you have all had your say, we'll pray on this question together and make our decision."

"Grace? I don't understand!" Donner wanted to grab her, shake some sense into her.

It had been all settled, the Elders had approved his apprenticeship, they could finally get married now. Her father couldn't stand in their way anymore.

But now—"Joel Eicke? You're going to marry *Joel Eicke?* I told you, it's all set, I've got the apprenticeship! We don't have to wait any more."

"Look, did it ever occur to you that I *wasn't* waiting? Maybe you want to do something so . . . unclean. But not me, all right?"

"What are you talking about? You're not the one who's going to be a doctor! I am!"

"It's still unclean. Other people's blood. All over your hands, all the time." She shuddered. "*Touching* me."

"I can't believe this! You talk like doctoring was a *sin,* or something! You *knew* I wanted this! You always knew!"

"That was a long time ago. We were kids. You said you were going to take care of *horses*. I mean, I know *somebody* has to do that kind of thing, but . . ."

He reached for her arm. "Your father talked you into this, didn't he? Marrying Joel Eicke instead of me. Look, Grace, you don't have to do this! Once we're married and you're away from him—"

She slapped his hand away. "Don't *touch* me, all right? I don't *want* to marry you, Donner Yates! Can't you hear me? I don't *want* to! I tried to tell you the other day, but you wouldn't *listen!*"

"But—" He was still thinking it was just a mistake, that all he had to do was say the right thing, find the right words, and she'd hear what he was saying and it would be all right again. But this time nothing came out.

He shook his head and tried again, but she was turning away from him, walking away. And even then he would have run after her, calling her name, but some hidden sense of self-preservation stopped him, told him it was over, that he'd only hurt himself if he kept this up.

But . . . Grace!

His mother wasn't very much help. "All your life, Donner, you've gone your own way, no matter what people said to you. No matter what I said, certainly."

"You didn't tell me this would happen!"

"Not . . . this, exactly. But you knew it would be hard, you knew how some people feel about doctoring."

"But not Grace!"

"Are you sure? Did you tell her? Did you talk to her about this?"

"Yes! Well, I mean, she knew I was always helping Doc."

"Helping Doc with her chores is one thing. And that's all you really did at

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first. Look, son, don't take me wrong, I think doctoring is a fine thing, I can remember how hard Doc worked to try to save your father. I'm proud of you that you want to do it, but you know how the Witnesses are, what they believe. Now did Grace Trusdale ever actually promise she was going to marry you?"

"We talked about it all the time! We talked about everything—where we'd live, how she wouldn't have to go to her father's church anymore—everything!"

"But that's when you were kids! It's one thing to run off to the woods when you're twelve, it's something else when you're eighteen. I don't think you've really noticed how Grace has grown. She's a woman now, and she wants a life in the community."

"With *Joel Eicke!*"

"The Eickes have a full five-eighths share in the sawmill, with what used to be ours. People look up to them. She'd have a good home there. Those things matter to a woman, more than I think you know." There was a bitterness in her voice that surprised him. Not once in the years since Dad was killed had she ever complained, ever said a word resenting the neighbors who took more credit for helping the widow and orphaned children than they ever gave.

Now she shook her head. "People change."

"No," Donner insisted, still denying it. He wouldn't listen. She tried to stop him, but he pulled away, ran out the door. He kept going until he was into the cool shade of the lower slope and finally collapsed onto a bed of dry brown pine needles that had collected in a hollow. The scent of them brought conflicting memories: his father's blood leaking onto the ground, his stolen secret moments with Grace: the pine needles stuck in her tangled red hair; him pulling them out with his fingertips, so carefully, one by one. They *had* just been kids.

And now Grace was grown, and all that wildness had changed into something else—he wasn't sure what. He *had* touched her, that once, and known that she'd wanted it. She had meant to marry him, then, at least. And all the years since . . . all right, it hadn't been quite the same, but she'd never told him any different, never said she'd changed her mind.

Was it the doctoring? Was that really it? What if he gave it up, then?

But—to do what? Take Elder Lewis's place on the boundary patrol? What kind of life would that be together, with him gone a month at a time?

Go into timbering, working for the mill? On sharework, it'd have to be. The horses, the tools that had belonged to his dad were sold now, gone to buy food for a growing family of orphans. Donner knew how men like that had to live, their families on the charity list at church every year, their kids going barefoot to save their hand-down shoes for the winter. Was that the life Grace wanted? Joel Eicke, he knew, could give her a lot more.

Most of the boys he'd gone to school with had been apprenticed years ago. They knew useful trades already, they could support a wife with what they brought in. And Grace—how long had he expected her to wait?

Well, he had to find out. Had to be sure, before it was all too late.

That evening, stepping up onto the Trusdale porch, Donner realized that he'd never come up to Grace's front door before, never been inside the house except for the kitchen in the back, when he was a kid, with all the rest of them, together. He knocked, firmly. One of the Trusdale kids, red-haired like Grace, opened the door, boggled at him with wide-open eyes.

"I've come to talk to Grace."

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The door banged shut, and Donner could hear the kid's voice from inside: "Dad!"

A moment later, the door opened again and he was suddenly confronting Elder Trusdale, dressed up in his Sunday suit. "I've come to talk to Grace."

"I told you, boy—"

Donner interrupted. "Would you call her, please? There's some things I have to say to her."

Trusdale glowered at him a moment, then kind of twitched. "All right, I'll call her. But it's too late. She's made up her own mind." Donner didn't hear the self-satisfied tone in the Elder's voice that he would have expected. Maybe he wasn't so happy with the Eicke marriage, after all.

When Grace appeared, there was a combative look in her eyes, though whether it was directed at him or her father, Donner wasn't sure. Maybe both, he thought, as she frowned at the Elder and told him, "Father, maybe you'd better leave us alone now."

For a miracle, the old man obeyed and went back into the house, leaving them together on the porch. That alone warned Donner that something drastic had changed.

Then she turned on him. "You heard Father. I've made up my mind. I'm marrying Joel Eicke. I like him, and he's going to be coming here to see me tonight, so I hope this won't take too long."

"Your father doesn't seem all that happy about it."

"He can't force me to marry in the Witness Church. He's not happy about that."

"But I guess Joel's better than the alternative? Is that right?" Donner demanded bitterly.

She gave it straight back to him. "Yes, that's right."

He shook his head and apologized, "I'm sorry, I didn't come here to fight with you. But I just have to know one thing. Is it really the doctoring? If I gave it up—the apprenticeship, all of it—could you still change your mind?"

She made a small sound in her throat and turned away from him. "I thought that's what you always wanted to do. Doctoring."

He clenched his hands. They felt suddenly sweaty. "It was. I thought you knew that all along. Maybe I never told you, not in so many words. But you were what I always wanted first, Grace. I *know* you knew that."

Her back was to him. He couldn't see her face. "And is that what you're going to do now? Give up doctoring?"

He shook his head again, though she couldn't see it. "I don't know, maybe. But I've got to think of Doc, too. She's getting old, and she needs me. There's no one else—"

She spun around to face him. The tears spilling out of her eyes made them look brilliant. "Damn you, Donner Yates!"

The door slammed in his face.

And there on the other side of the front gate, he saw Joel Eicke, stopping short where he was. They stared at each other, then Donner went through the gate and past him without a word.

—3—

Up until the wedding, Donner lay sleepless every night, wrestling with insane fantastic notions like snatching Grace away from Joel Eicke, up onto

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his horse and carrying her off, up beyond the boundary where no one would follow them, and committing lust with her in a deep bed of pine needles. It had to be some mistake, he kept telling himself. She'd change her mind, she'd realize what she was doing and come back to him.

There were moments, too, in the sobriety of daylight, that he thought it might be best if he just signed on to the border patrol and spent the rest of his life up there in the high country, away from other people and especially from women. Women were only put on earth to torment a man and drive him crazy.

But there was Doc, and she was counting on him, and the whole business of his apprenticeship was finally settled, and in the end he never tried to carry out any of the crazy schemes his desperate imagination came up with. Grace Trusdale married Joel Eicke without any unseemly incident marring the ceremony, though both families had more or less expected something from him.

It was hard, the years that came after. He still dreamed about her, dreams full of sin and lust, just like the preachers warned about, that had him reaching for his own most sinful part in his bed at night, alone.

But whenever he saw her on the streets Donner would just nod and say, "Miz Eicke," and Grace would coldly reply, "Mister Yates." Not "Doc," she never called him that, she wouldn't say it, even after everyone else did. And there was never a sideways look in her eye that might hint of regret or invitation, until he slowly had to accept that maybe it hadn't been a mistake after all. Inexplicably, Grace really didn't want him. Maybe—had never really wanted him.

The only consolation he'd accept was work, but fortunately there was enough of that. Gradually, as he learned, Donner started to take over more of the doctoring—with the animals at first, especially the horses and cows and hogs, where the doc often had to get down on his knees in the straw and shit. Doc was getting too old for that kind of thing.

It was still mostly Doc they asked for, Doc they wanted to see coming into their barns and their sickrooms. But more and more she was standing back now. Her joints were starting to hurt her, especially her hands, where the knuckles were swollen and painful. And just lately—the more Donner studied Doc's medical books, the more he read about the pathologies of the human heart, he began to recognize what her symptoms were, what it meant when she had to stop abruptly and sit down sometimes until she could get her breath. So it bothered him when people didn't understand, when they kept on asking, "Where's Doc?" if she didn't show up to tend their ills, when it would have been the death of the old woman to climb all the way over the fences to their back pasture or slog through snow drifts to get to their house in the middle of a storm.

Doc, of course, knew what was wrong better than he did, and she brewed up her own medicines out of foxglove and willow bark and other plants, but they both understood there was really nothing more she could do, except to take it easy and let Donner handle more of the workload. It was frustrating, though, to watch her slowly dying while the medical books kept telling him about the drugs, the miracle cures and operations they used to have Outside. Heart transplants, from one body to another.

"How could they do that? How did it work?"

"Well, I guess it took all kinds of special equipment to keep the patient alive while they were operating." Doc frowned at him from the kitchen

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counter, where she was sorting herbs. "Why? You're not thinking of trying anything, are you?"

"I was just wondering, that's all."

"The way you suture, I hope not!" She shook her head. "If it were God's Will that we could get a new heart when our old one fails, I expect He'd have us grow a new one."

Donner didn't like to hear her talk like that. It wasn't like Doc to go on about God's Will. "Is it that much different from a blood transfusion? You showed me how to do those."

"Because you wouldn't give me any peace until I did. But you'll probably go to your grave the way I will, without ever getting the chance to do one. Besides, think: just where were you going to get the heart? Last time I looked, everyone was already using theirs."

"An animal?"

She shook her head. "The body rejects foreign tissue."

Still, he couldn't help wondering how it might work. He finally chose a chicken to practice on—two chickens, actually. But truth to tell, Doc was right, he hadn't had enough practice suturing, and he discovered it was a slippery, frustrating job; the veins and arteries wouldn't match up right, they collapsed on him, or tore, and he just couldn't manage the tiny stitches.

Then a chilly draft came blowing into the barn, and Donner looked up embarrassed to see Doc standing in the doorway, staring at him with the oddest expression. "What the—"

He gestured helplessly. "I just thought I might try, I mean, just to see how . . ."

She took a closer look at his work, shook her head. "Damned young fool," she said, but she was trying unsuccessfully not to laugh, and finally he couldn't help himself, either.

They had both chickens stewed, with dumplings, and made a big pot of soup with what was left over.

Well, as usual, Doc turned out to be right. After she died, it wasn't long before people were starting to call him Doc Yates. After another generation, he supposed, he'd be Doc to everyone in the settlement and no one would remember he had any other name.

But there was still the problem with the women having babies. For all that everyone in the settlement would call him in when their kids were hurt or when their animals needed tending, a lot of the women just didn't like the notion of a man involved in a birth, with all that a doctor had to do. It was no use how many times Doc had told them about her father doing all the births before her, and the other docs before him, all of them men, ever since the settlement was founded. For the last thirty years and more, the women had a woman doctor to take care of them, and now they didn't like it any other way.

Of course, as Doc used to say, women were having babies a long time before there were any doctors, and they'd keep on having babies anyway, whether they had a doctor to tend them or not.

Some did call on him, of course. And with the others, there were times, after they'd been in labor for a day with just their mothers or sisters to help them through it, someone would finally say, "Go get Doc Yates!" He figured by now that he'd saved at least one baby by turning it the right way in the womb, which he'd done the same with calves and foals a dozen times before.

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And one time he had to tell the family the best chance for saving both mother and child was to cut the baby out. He was almost sure he could have done it, his suturing was a lot better by that time, but of course they said No, and the baby was finally born dead, bluish gray and limp, and the mother bled almost white from the struggle.

She was Allie Masterson, Marthie Ellen's sister, and it grieved him to think that old slight might have made the family refuse to call him in until it was too late.

"Maybe if you were married," Doc used to say, "they might think differently."

Donner might have pointed out that few young women were eager to marry a man whose work got blood all over his hands, or that Doc had never married, herself. But that wasn't the same thing, not in the eyes of the Elders. An unmarried woman could be assumed to be chaste; it was the male nature that was sinful and full of lust.

His mother, too, whenever they visited, kept mentioning the names of likely prospects. "Now there's Hanni Stephenson, she's a young widow, not thirty yet, with a boy to raise. You must know her, she goes to the Covenant church. It wouldn't hurt to just get to know her a little better."

But Donner stubbornly refused. He'd been set on marrying Grace Trusdale just as long as he could remember, and anyone else would just be second-best. It wouldn't be fair, not to the woman, either.

And now Grace was pregnant. There was even talk that she'd conceived last year, but miscarried the pregnancy early. Whispered talk, as if he wasn't supposed to overhear, but you couldn't keep that kind of secret in the settlement, not where everyone knew everyone else. He hadn't been called in at the time, was all he knew for sure.

This time, though, her condition was far enough along to show. The last few times he'd seen her on the street, there was no doubt. It ate at him, he couldn't help himself, seeing her that way—Joel Eicke's child in her belly when it should have been his own.

Now, though . . .

He hadn't seen her at all lately, not for weeks. Of course it could mean nothing. It probably meant nothing.

But Donner stood within view of the Guardian Church on a Sunday, and he didn't see her going in with the rest of her family, not with the Eickes, or with the Trusdales at the Witness Church, either. And when he asked, not directly, but through a friend of his mother's, he got an embarrassed look and, "I think maybe she's gone away for a while."

Gone away. Gone into seclusion. The Witness women did it when they had their monthly periods—the blood made them unclean, so they believed. There was a retreat house next to the church, and that was where most of the women gave birth, too. Donner had only been inside a few times, only once now without Doc, and that, he was given to understand, had been strongly condemned by some of the Elders.

But Grace had joined the Guardian Church when she married into the Eickes. For them, *gone away* usually just meant staying inside at home and not seeing any visitors outside of family.

It could mean nothing. It could mean anything. But Donner sat at Doc's old kitchen table and went through all the medical books, and he saw all the things it just could be, might be. Bleeding in later pregnancy—a lot of the women would say a little bleeding was perfectly normal, nothing to worry

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about, but the books suggested otherwise. Especially in a woman who'd just miscarried the year before.

What could he do, though? Go over to the Eickes' house, demand to see her? Doc might have done it. Doc might have gotten away with it, maybe. But the Eickes would probably throw him down the stairs if he showed up at their door.

Donner pushed the books aside. The basket by the side of the stove was almost empty, and right now he welcomed the chance to take out his frustration by splitting more firewood.

Doc's old axe had seen better days, but Donner always kept it sharp, the way his dad had taught him. Dad and Mister Eicke had been partners in the sawmill. If Dad hadn't died, he supposed he'd be working there now, he and his brothers, partners with Joel Eicke.

As the lengths of stovewood split apart along the grain and piled up at his feet, he had a vision of that other life he'd never live: out on the slope timbering, coming home to Grace all smelling of pinewood and sap, making love to Grace in the bedroom where his parents had slept—where Dad had died.

He'd never openly accused Mister Eicke of letting his father die that day, but the memory had been eating at his heart ever since: seeing Eicke back away from Dad as he lay on the ground, afraid to get his blood on his hands. And now the Eickes had Dad's share of the mill and they were rich, as rich as anyone in the settlement, while the Yates family had just scraped by all these years.

He'd never blamed Mom for selling out, it had to be done, but that had been his future she sold. The Eickes would have had to take him on as an apprentice if he'd asked—community sentiment would have insisted—but he'd never be more than a share-worker, not a partner, the way Dad was. Donner had only one regret in choosing doctoring instead, and that was Grace. But sometimes he couldn't help remembering how it would have been if Dad hadn't died, and then the thought of her married to Joel Eicke—he hit the log a glancing blow and the wood went flying, half-way across the shed.

Enough of that, before he killed himself, too. He gathered the split stovewood and carried it into the house, where the medical books were still open on the table next to the cooling stove.

But what good could all the knowledge in the books do if he couldn't even see Grace to know if something was wrong?

News finally came from an unexpected event: the announcement of his brother Wil's upcoming wedding. Steven, of course, had been married three years ago, but Wil—Donner had always considered his youngest brother just a kid. Now the kid was grown up, working in the sawmill and getting married to Ruth Eicke.

The two families had been close, years ago, before Dad's accident. Now the wedding would inevitably bring them together again with ties of kinship and its obligations.

Grace, herself, in advanced pregnancy, might not attend the ceremony, but her mother-in-law, the bride's aunt, certainly would, as well as an assortment of female cousins and other relatives. Donner, by this time, knew how these things were done, and he pressed his mother to find out what he needed to know.

As it happened, little pressure was necessary. The women, happy as

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women always were at the prospect of a wedding, were eager to get together and trade family news, and Grace's condition was one of the most interesting topics.

"Was she there? Did you see her?" Donner demanded impatiently of his mother.

"Just what makes you think something has to be wrong with her?"

"She's not going out. Not to church, or family gatherings, or anywhere outside her house."

His mother frowned at him. "And you'd know all that? You've been following her."

Donner sighed. "I'm not trying to interfere where I don't belong. I'd wonder the same about any other pregnant woman in the settlement. It's my job."

Her expression was skeptical, which he ignored. "Look, just . . . did they say anything about her, or not?"

She finally relented. "Apparently she's been kind of uncomfortable for the last couple of weeks. Keeping off her feet on account of the swelling, that's all."

"Swelling?" A dozen alarming possibilities sprang to Donner's mind. "What kind of swelling? Where?"

She dismissed his concern. "Every woman I know has had swollen ankles when she was pregnant. When I was having you, I couldn't take off my shoes all day long, or I'd never get them back on again."

It was always the same, the women all thought they knew better than he did about these things, because, after all, how many babies had he carried? Doc, they might have believed, even though she was never married, but he was a man, and young and inexperienced, so what could he possibly know?

"Look," he said, "swollen ankles might not mean anything important. But it's possible, all right? All I want is a chance to examine her, to see for myself that there's nothing really wrong."

"All right," she said reluctantly. "I'll talk to someone, I'll see what I can do."

It was Miz Trusdale who came to him finally, which surprised Donner almost as much as if he'd opened the door to find the Elder himself on his doorstep. "I hear you're saying there might be something wrong with my daughter," she said bluntly.

"I couldn't tell without seeing her, but I understand she's had some swelling, and yes, that's possibly cause for concern."

Grace's mother bit on her lower lip. "Well, I can't say I like the way she looks lately. I remember how my sister Hope was sick this way when she had her first."

Donner nodded. He'd reviewed Doc's old notes and recognized the case. "Miz Milholland, wasn't it?"

"That's right. Doc had her on all kinds of medicines to try to get that water out of her. Now, say there was something wrong with Grace, what should she take?"

"I'd really have to see her to be sure. It might not be anything serious, it might be something she could just treat with bed rest and diet, but unless I can examine her, I don't know."

Miz Trusdale clearly didn't like that word, "examine," but her concern finally overrode her disapproval. "I suppose it won't hurt for you just to look at her," she said finally. "I don't know, all this uncleanness, right there in the house where people are living. It just doesn't seem right."

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There were only women in the Eicke house when they arrived: Miz Eicke and her oldest daughter Mary. From the looks on each of their faces when Grace's mother announced, "I've brought Doc Yates to take a look at my daughter," the visit had been the subject of debate.

But Donner forgot about all of them the moment he got his first glance at Grace, sitting up in bed with her red curls pulled back away from her face. She didn't look good, not good at all, and Donner just wanted to sweep her up in his arms and away from this place, these strangers.

But what he said was, "Miz Eicke, I understand you've been having some trouble?"

"My feet and ankles have been swelling up some for about a month now," she admitted, with no sign of gladness at seeing him.

But it was more than just her ankles, Donner knew from that first glance. It was the swelling of her face that alarmed him. He pressed to the swollen area above her cheekbone, saw the imprint of his finger slowly fill up again. This wasn't good.

The testimony of Doc's old, wheezing blood pressure monitor confirmed his apprehensions. "You have a potentially serious condition, Miz Eicke. You're not in immediate danger, but there's a real risk of it. It's essential that your condition be monitored, every day, to make sure it doesn't get any worse."

"That means you? Coming here every day to check on me?" she asked dubiously.

Firmly, "It does." He issued a number of other instructions, about Grace staying in bed and avoiding salt and monitoring her urine output, along with medications to try to bring down her blood pressure and reduce the edema.

A hundred times, Donner had stared with bitter regret at the shelves in Doc's workroom that had originally been stockpiled with drugs by the enclave's founders, a supply long since exhausted. He'd never regretted this loss more than now, with Grace lying sick in front of him. All he had now to help her were the medications he'd made himself from plants and herbs, the way Doc had taught him.

"The most important thing at the moment," he told her, "is to get rid of that water you're retaining. Before it puts too much of a strain on your heart."

"But how's the baby?" she asked, alarmed.

"The baby seems to be fine, I could hear a good, strong heartbeat."

"Thanks, Doc," she replied, with a wan smile that shook him to the heart.

"I'll be back tomorrow." He said it with all the authority in his voice that he'd learned from Doc, but once he stepped outside the Eickes' door, he almost started trembling, he felt so helpless. *Grace!* Even with the bruises under her eyes and her swollen face, she was still the thing he loved most in the world, and it was agony to have to see her there in that bed, to call her "Miz Eicke" and act like she was no more to him than any other patient, when he wanted her more than anything.

For her sake, because she needed him now, Donner repressed his own desires, as hard as it was. But when he came the next day to the Eicke house, he found not only the women there to meet him, but Joel Eicke, with an unwelcoming set to his jaw.

"I'm here to see Miz Eicke," Donner told him, careful to give no grounds for Joel to take offense at his presence. Doc's old bag and the relic of the

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blood-pressure device gave him the necessary authority, while Joel stood close at his back, resentful but unprotesting.

Grace didn't seem worse, but neither was her condition improved. Donner scowled and doubled the dosage of the medications he'd given her the day before.

"How long has this got to go on?" Joel asked, frowning, as soon as they were out of her hearing.

"Until she has the baby. Ultimately, that's the only real cure. If she gets worse, there are other things I could try, but they might be kind of drastic, and I'd rather not."

"No," Joel insisted, "we don't want any of that, not here in this house. Don't forget, Grace is *my wife*."

As if Donner could forget it for an instant, seeing her here. But he didn't give Joel the satisfaction of an reply, or an excuse to forbid him to see her.

Yet no matter what he tried, Grace's condition remained the same. Donner grew more and more worried. In these cases, failure to improve meant danger. Every day the risk increased.

Doc's medical books were no help at all. The books assumed that there were hospitals, that there were effective drugs—things the settlers in the enclave had turned their backs on, generations ago.

The frustration bred new fantasies that kept Donner awake at night: riding off with Grace to find a hospital somewhere, riding off alone to bring back some new miracle drug that would save her.

Miz Trusdale, his new and unexpected ally, tried to reassure him, "You've done your best, you've done everything you can do. What happens now is God's Will. My sister Hope had a bad time, but she lived to have three more children. Sometimes, the only thing is to pray."

But Donner had no use for any will that could take Grace away from him, and his prayers, such as they were, refused to submit to it.

Then on one of his daily visits, Grace complained of a headache, and when Donner took her blood pressure, it hit a new, alarming high. He frowned, tested it again to be sure, because Doc's old monitor had been patched and repaired so many times it couldn't be called reliable. But the reading was the same the second time.

Carefully, not to frighten her, he said, "I think it's time to do something about this."

"What do you mean?"

"I think you need to have this baby now."

"But . . . it's not time! It's too early!"

"You're, what, about eight months along by now, aren't you? The baby should be all right. Plenty of babies are born a few weeks early, they do just fine!"

"I don't know . . ."

None of the rest of the family welcomed the idea, either. "Nobody's cutting my wife open, spilling her blood right here in this house!" Joel declared hotly. "We don't hold with that kind of uncleanness!"

The others gathered in a hostile knot, prepared to prevent any such abomination.

"I didn't say anything about cutting her open!" Donner insisted.

"They say you were going to cut open Allie Masterson, last year," Miz Trusdale declared, siding with her in-laws this time.

"That was a completely different situation. And don't forget—that baby *died* because I wasn't allowed to help. Miz Masterson almost died, too."

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"Well, some things are God's Will."

"Maybe they are," Donner retorted impatiently, "but this isn't one of them. I'm not talking about cutting her open. I do think it's time to induce labor, though. And I know Doc would have said the same thing, if she were here now."

"Just what does that mean?" Miz Eicke asked suspiciously.

"It means giving her some medicine to start the birth. That's all. Nothing more unclean than birthing ever is."

"Right here in the *house,*" Miz Trusdale muttered disapprovingly under her breath, but not so low the Eickes couldn't be expected to hear.

"It doesn't matter to me where it is," Donner insisted, "as long as we don't delay too long."

"And who gave *you* any say in it?" Joel demanded belligerently, but that was going too far, and the women all turned on him.

Donner took advantage of the enemy's confusion by going to his bag for a bottle. He poured a measure and held it out to Grace. "Here, take this."

"What is it?"

"It's a drug to induce labor. To start the birth process."

"It won't hurt the baby?"

"It's just the same as giving birth naturally," he assured her, almost as confident as he tried to sound.

She winced as a spasm made her close her eyes. "All right. I'll do it."

Within an hour, the first cramps started, and this signaled to the women that things were really underway. Miz Trusdale hesitated visibly, but she finally retreated from the scene after hugging Grace and weeping about uncleanness, having the baby right there in the house, it just wasn't *right*. The Eicke women reasserted their full authority and banished the menfolk, all except for Doc Yates, of course. Donner was glad enough to accept a cup of tea and a slice of pie. It would be a long, hard time now, even if all went well.

At first, the women kept coming and going, in and out of the bedroom, as if it were indecent to leave him in there alone with her, but Donner held his ground, continuing to monitor her progress. He just wished there was something he could do to make it easier on Grace. The loose hair at her forehead was damp and dark with sweat, her face was blotched and puffy, there were dark circles under her eyes, but it was the most beautiful face in the world to him. With each contraction, she made a little moaning sound in the back of her throat as she tensed against the pain. Once, when her mother had left the room, Donner reached for her hand, and she seized it like a lifeline. Then as the pain eased, she fell back against her pillow, exhausted, looking up at him. "Donner, I'm afraid."

He felt his heart swell with happiness, hearing her call him by his name again. "I won't let anything bad happen to you. No matter what."

But another hour passed, then another, and when he took her blood pressure again, it had shot up even higher.

"How's your headache?" he asked carefully, trying to keep the fear from his voice.

"I . . . don' know. . . ." Her voice was slurred. He lifted one of her eyelids, saw the tell-tale red of small burst blood vessels. Fighting the urge to panic, Donner reached for the medicine bottle again, but he hesitated, recalling the effects of an overdose. It could be fatal. He had to do *something,* though!

There was one possibility—not in the medical books—but from Doc's

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notes. Only he knew he had to act right away, before anyone came back into the room and saw what he was doing.

He took his smallest scalpel from his bag and passed it quickly through the flame of the lamp. He picked a prominent vein in her elbow and pressed the point of the scalpel down. The blood welled out, alarmingly fast. Donner held a water pitcher to catch it, trying to estimate how much he was letting. It was an old, old treatment, but there was still good reason behind it. No other way could he bring Grace's blood pressure down fast enough, far enough to save her from a catastrophic stroke or convulsion.

Almost, he thought he could see visible improvement already. Her breathing steadied, her eyes started to open.

And she saw, she saw what he was doing, saw the flow of blood—

Her scream startled him. Before Donner could react, before he could put down the scalpel and stop the bleeding, the entire Eicke household came bursting into the room.

"What are you *doing?*"

"It's blood! It's unclean!"

"I knew it! Never should have trusted him!"

Donner was trying to protest, to explain, "Her blood pressure—I had to bring it down. . . ." but before he could get the words out, Joel was on him, striking him back away from the bed, and the pitcher flew out of his hand, splashing across the floor—a vivid red stain of darkest sin.

Women screamed. Men cursed. He slashed out once with his scalpel as they rushed him, but Joel and his father were big men, and they overpowered him, despite his frantic efforts to resist, and threw him bodily down the front stairs.

"You stay *away* from her!" Joel yelled furiously. "If you ever come back here again, I'll have a gun ready! I'll blow your bloody head off!"

"You're going to kill her!" Donner cried in hopeless rage. "Just like you killed my father!"

—4—

Sympathies in the community were fairly divided on the issue of Grace's death. Quite a few people felt that Donner had done the best he could, trying to save her life in an emergency.

Others, including the preacher and most Elders of the Guardian Church, considered him a monster of sin and uncleanness. For most, it was just proof that a man had no business where women were giving birth.

None of their opinions mattered to Donner. He knew why Grace had died: because she had the misfortune to be born in the enclave, where everyone was afraid of spilling blood.

He could have done it, he could have saved her, if only he had the drugs listed in Doc's medical books, if only he could have taken her to one of those hospitals he'd read about.

It had been his fantasy to lift her up to the saddle of his horse, to carry her off. To a place all shining white, where doctors could do miracles and had machines to look inside the body and tell what was wrong, machines that let them cut a beating heart out of one body and transplant it to another. Where people never lay bleeding to death while everyone stood around, afraid to touch them. Doc, of course, would say those hospitals were

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cesspools of infection and germs. She'd think he was crazy, leaving the enclave, exposing himself to plague and disease.

But Donner didn't much care anymore. The only real reason he had to stay in that place was dead.

He rode for three days, until he was starting to think that maybe the Witnesses were right, after all, and there were no living souls left outside the boundary. Doc's records had said there'd been a town somewhere, not too far from the settlement, but no clue of the direction or distance. Finally he came on what was unmistakably a road, and he turned his horse to follow it. After a while, a drive turned off the road and there was a house at the end of it, lit up so bright that Donner knew it must be electric light, even though he couldn't see the wires.

The people were astonished to see him, traveling on horseback, all alone. Donner had a little trouble understanding how they talked, but they showed him a map and gave him directions to the nearest town. They pressed him to stay for dinner and the night, first, instead of riding off into the dark.

The house was like a miracle. Not just the lights, but heat without firewood, water without pumping, books that jumped right out of the desk and talked out loud to you, answered your questions! Yet the Garcias, that was their name, laughed and said they were just plain people, not even close to being rich.

Donner asked the desk about hospitals, and it showed him pictures that looked even more bright and gleaming than the ones in Doc's old books back in the enclave. He could have stared at them for hours.

The Garcias expressed some concern. Was he feeling sick, did he need to see a doctor? They could fly him in if he did, it would be no trouble.

No, Donner assured them, he was just curious, he'd never been in a hospital, he just wanted to know what they were like.

"Never been in a hospital? In all your life?" They looked at him like he was something really strange, then. "Where *have* you been living?"

For some reason, he didn't really want to say. "North of here a ways, a few days' ride. We don't get Outside much, though."

Thankfully, they didn't press him for more information.

The Garcias said they had a couch where he could sleep the night. The next morning, though, when he woke, Donner was burning with fever and it was hard for him to breathe. The Garcias took him to the hospital, but by then he was too incoherent to understand that he was actually flying, in an aircraft like the one he'd seen all those years ago, looking up with so much wonder at the sky.

The people had no faces. He didn't know what they were. Fever turned them into the demons from hell the Elders used to preach about, supervising his torments in the lake of brimstone and fire. They'd told him his sins were going to damn him straight to hell, and here he was, burning. Outside was just the road to hell, like they'd always said.

Then one time he woke and opened his eyes, and it wasn't hell anymore, it was just a room, all gleaming and silvery and white, just like the pictures of the hospitals. He lay almost naked on a bed covered by a kind of net that held him down, and there were machines next to it, strange blinking machines, and tubes stuck into him, and colored patches that blinked like the machines.

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From the pictures of the hospitals, he recognized what they must be, all the shining new medical machines they had now, Outside. And from there it wasn't too far to the conclusion that he must be in a hospital himself.

Just then someone came into the room—he couldn't see a door opening up, but the person walked in, anyway. His face was covered, so it looked for a moment like he had no face, but then Donner could see it was just some kind of mask over it, that was all.

"You feel better?"

A man's voice asking the question. Donner thought about it. How he felt was so weak he could barely move his arms or legs, and he ached, everywhere, most especially in his throat and when he breathed. But he supposed it was better than hell.

"I guess so."

"You know where you are?" The voice sounded curious.

"Hospital?" It seemed like the best guess.

"That's right. You're in the max-iso ward of Northcrest ACU." A pause. "Do you know what that means?"

But Donner had questions of his own. He managed to raise his right arm for a few seconds, looking at the tube that ran into it. "Blood transfusion?"

"Ah, no. That line is fluids, nutrients. The other is your med line. You know, medication, drugs? You were on the breather, too, but we took you off yesterday. I don't suppose you remember?"

Donner shook his head faintly. It felt like his brain was bruised on the inside, jostling loose inside his skull. He remembered hell, more or less—the faceless demons, the lake of fire. But that was obviously his mind distorting everything he saw. The people without faces were only wearing masks.

"Mister Yates? That is your name, isn't it? The people who brought you in, the Garcias, they said you told them that was your name, but you had no ID. Nothing. We ran you through the national datacore, and you weren't there. What we'd like to know is, just where in the world did you come from?"

A phrase from church floated into Donner's mind: "*We went to dwell apart.*"

"What?" The masked figure shook its head.

Donner didn't like talking to people with no faces, you couldn't see what they were thinking. His eyes closed. He didn't want to talk anymore.

"Mister Yates, have you ever had a communicable disease before in your life? Any kind of sickness? Ever?"

Donner's eyes flew open in sudden alarm. "Disease? *Plague?*" But of course, he was in a hospital, there was something wrong with him. A disease. The Elders had been right, the Outside was full of disease. . . .

"Plague? Lord, man, *when* did you come from? No, you just contracted a common virus. But it almost killed you. Would have killed you, if they'd taken a few more hours getting you here. Mister Yates, are you aware that you have essentially no immunity to disease? Where did you come from? How did you survive until now?"

In the hospital, Donner's room had a window. He could look outside, see the mountains. They said he was up on the twelfth floor, that's why he had such a view.

It was nothing like the view from the ridgeline, though, up where he rode fence. Except for what he could see of the mountains in the distance, it was

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all streets and buildings and concrete here, all lit up at night so he could barely see the stars at all.

It was what they called a max-iso ward: maximum isolation. They had to keep him apart from all the rest of the people Outside, or else their disease organisms would infect him. The doctors and anyone else who came to see him all had to wear masks, and even then they had to stay on the other side of the transparent barrier they called the iso membrane.

The doctors said he could probably leave the hospital one day, when they were finished treating him. There wasn't anything really wrong with him, it was just that living in isolation from disease all his life, his system just never had a chance to develop any immunities. Until he did, though, it would be risking his life to leave this room.

The doctors were all fascinated by him, by his case. They came just about every day to take some of his blood for testing, using the machines they operated from the other side of the membrane. But they took time to answer a lot of his questions, too.

He'd told them he was the doctor back in the settlement, even though it was pretty clear they didn't really believe him. He didn't know a tenth of what a doctor had to know here, Outside.

They could have saved Grace. With the medicines they used, she never would have had to die.

They could have given Doc a new heart, too, but that wasn't quite such a simple thing. The problem wasn't the surgery, the physical part, fitting the little blood vessels to each other. It was the immune factor, the tissue compatibility. The way a blood transfusion had to be matched for the right type of blood. The doctors here understood a lot more about immunity problems than was ever in Doc's old medical books.

They still had the plague. Of course they didn't call it that, but Donner knew it was the same disease—immune deficiency disease. Except that people mostly didn't die from it now. The doctors had learned how to manage it, keep the sick people alive. And the virus had gotten weaker as it spread through the population during the generations after the enclave had been settled. Most everybody seemed to carry it now, even if it didn't always make them very sick.

Just the way they carried the virus that had almost killed him when he caught it at the Garcias' house, what they'd said had just been a common cold.

Except for the doctors, people didn't come to his room very much. Machines brought him food and clean clothes. And there was what they called the Network, that provided entertainment and information both, and he could see other people through it, talk to them, anywhere in the world. So many other people—and to think the Witnesses in the enclave thought they might be the only ones left alive on Earth!

Only none of them could come through the membrane in his room, or even breathe the same air that he did. It could kill him.

A pip came through on his Network channel, and he answered it, saw Doctor Kee's smooth brown face smiling at him. She was just about his favorite of all his doctors, who always took the time to explain things to him whenever they started a new procedure. Lately, though, his questions were more general. "Donner, you wanted to ask me something?"

"Well, I was reading about the recombinant vaccines you told me about. How they always set off an autoimmune disorder? I don't understand how that would work."

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She explained the problem, projecting a animated chart that made it clear—sort of. Then she got this thoughtful kind of look. "You've been researching all this on the Network, haven't you?"

"As much as I can." Through the Network, he'd already learned about immune deficiencies, antigens, and lymphocytes. And he'd read everything he could find about the disease that people in the enclave had called the Plague. But it was hard going. There were words and concepts he'd never even heard of, that didn't even exist when Doc's medical books were written.

"You're not just asking about your own case, are you? All these questions are going beyond that."

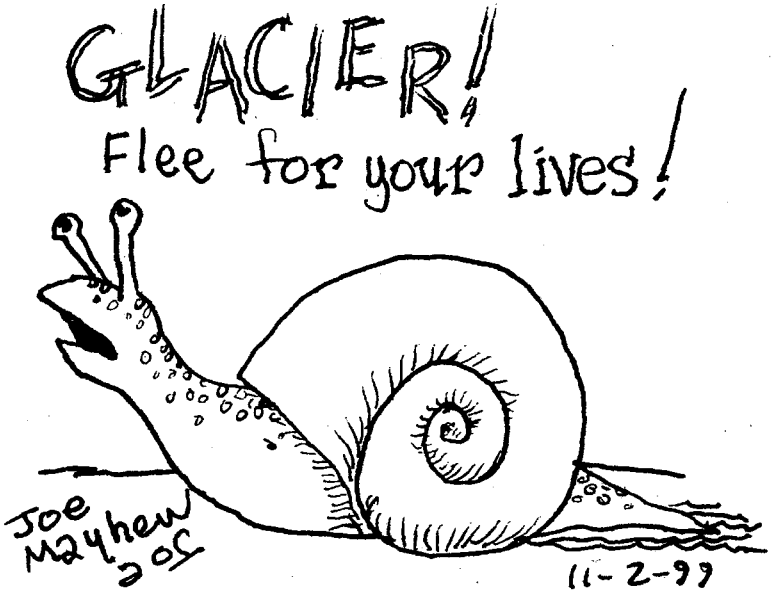
"Well, these are things I always wondered about, back there. That I never got the chance to find out."

"Donner, I wonder if you know, you can get a medical degree through the Network. Without leaving this room. Maybe you're not interested. . . ."

"I'm interested."

"Of course it might take you a long time. You've got a lot to catch up on. Basic studies, I mean. But it can be done, if you really want it."

He lifted his head for a moment to look through his window, looked back at the mountains, hazy with distance. Then a slight grin came to his face. "Well, I don't have much else but time now, do I? I guess maybe I couldn't get away from Doc Yates, after all." O



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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

FOREVER FREE
by Joe Haldeman
Ace, $21.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-441-00697-3

As the title indicates, this is a sequel to what is probably Haldeman's best-known novel, *The Forever War* (first published as an *Analog* serial, 1972-74). While the author has written several further novels about warfare (science fictional and otherwise) in the quarter century since that book, this is his first real look at the aftermath of war from the perspective of a character who is a mature veteran—which, of course, is what Haldeman himself has become in the years since. In this case, at least, the passage of years has done little to corrode the old soldier's fighting spirit.

The story picks up its protagonist, William Mandella, in more-or-less respectable middle age—settled down with a wife and two children, teaching physics and working as a fisherman in the outback of a wintry planet far from his native Earth. He and the other veterans have chosen their back-breaking way of life as the price of freedom, the alternative being merger into the group mind that calls itself Man.

But even here, they serve the ends of the group mind, providing a reservoir of genetic diversity in case of need. And enough of their children are accepting the invitation to join Man to make the parents uncomfortable.

Mandella and a few fellow veterans decide they need to find a way to make a more complete break from Earth and Man. A potential answer waits just a short distance away: a starship left over from the War. If somehow the veterans can gain control of it, they could find another, unsettled world, and make it their own. Never mind that they'd be starting over from scratch; at least they'd have genuine freedom, rather than their current reservation Indian status.

Complications follow: the discovery that their game is already known to the authorities, in the person of the local Man—in effect a sort of sheriff; the reluctance of some of their own children to take part in the great escape; and the discovery that the opposition to their plan runs much deeper than anyone (even the authorities) have any right to suspect. At that point the book jumps onto thematic investigation of the nature of freedom considerably more audacious than anything for which the reader has been prepared.

Not wanting to give away Haldeman's major plot surprises, it is hard to go into detail about the latter half of the book; let me simply suggest that the reader is taken into territory that would be congenial to Arthur C. Clarke or Olaf Stapledon, two of the most ingenious explorers of the interface between the physical and the metaphysical. Like those two, Haldeman builds from a firm foundation in hard science, and the reader is moved inexorably from the ordinary details of mundane life on a backward planet to a glimpse of the ultimate underpinnings of reality. This is first-rate science fiction by one of our most accomplished craftsmen. Highly recommended.

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MANIFOLD TIME
by Stephen Baxter
Del Rey, $24.00 (hc)
ISBN: 0-345-43075-1

Baxter begins this in a mostly recognizable U.S. in the year 2010, and proceeds to take the reader by gradual progression into some of the most startling extrapolations in recent SF. The novel is narrated from multiple points of view, but the focus of them all is Reid Malenfant, a wheeler-dealer space entrepreneur who decides that if the government isn't interested in a real space program, then he'll put one together out of venture capital. From that premise, Baxter piles surprise on surprise until we're in territory that begs comparison with Arthur C. Clarke at his best.

The fun starts early in the plot. Baxter comes up with a convincing method for the future to send us messages, and when the message is received and understood, it gives Malenfant a clear-cut goal. At the same time, Malenfant's team is training genetically enhanced Caribbean squid to operate certain elements of his initial probe; one of the first twists arises when it becomes clear that the squid have their own agenda. We also learn that super-intelligent children ("blues") have been born in various places around the world, and—no surprise—that they almost at once become hated pariahs. It takes a bit longer for the blues' powers and their agenda to become clear, but once they do, they are a major influence on everything else that happens.

Eventually, despite government obstruction bordering on open warfare, Malenfant and a select crew—his ex-wife, a blue child, and a mathematician of dubious sanity—leave Earth for their destination, a small asteroid where a landing facility has been erected by squid-run machines. They already know that some strange artifact awaits them, and that some bizarre temporal paradoxes appear to be taking place. But the stakes are high—as the mathematician has convincingly proven, the lifetime of the human race is nearing its end.

Malenfant travels much farther than he had any reason to expect, and there are several plot twists of the sort that are only possible in books that play with time travel—although the time travel possible in this book is not exactly the kind most SF readers will have seen before. Baxter is very good at finding ways to make effective stories out of cutting edge science, and readers who make the attempt to keep up with any of several fields will find him playing effectively with up-to-the-minute ideas and theories. He also does a fine job of conveying a feel for the way the Big Science community does business; the minor missteps in transcribing U.S. culture that jumped off the page in *Moonseed* are pretty much absent here.

Baxter is the real deal—possibly the best of several current writers who are working to bring the material of classic SF into a new century. Check him out.

THE CHOSEN
by Ricardo Pinto
Tor, $24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-312-87208-9

Here's a quirky fantasy by a new British author, with a sense of style that sets it apart from much of the rest of the field. The story begins in a castle where a powerful lord lives with his retainers and his young son and heir Carnelian. But barely has the reader settled into this familiar fantasy setting when a ship arrives, changing the lives of everyone in the Hold. Aboard are Masters—members of the ruling class of the society of which Carnelian's father is a

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member, and of which he himself is by birth a member.

At that point, Carnelian finds that everything he has taken for granted in life is overturned. His new status entails a set of complex rules—including the wearing of formal garments and masks—and absolute class distinctions, which his father has enforced only lightly during their provincial exile. But within a short time of the Masters' arrival—and the departure of Carnelian and his father with them to their mainland capital, where the old monarch is about to die—Carnelian has made several seemingly trivial errors of protocol that result in servants being summarily executed. Both the grueling ocean voyage and the dangerous trek across desert country to the Masters' capital city Osrakum give him ample proof of the cruelty and arrogance of the ruling elite that he is now expected to join.

Despite a slow recovery from a wound received during the journey, Carnelian's father is required to attend the palace, where the decision concerning a new ruler is being made. Carnelian himself must put their house in order—not an easy task, considering that another branch of the family has settled in during their long absence. Hardly has he begun the task—in which he encounters still more evidence of the routine cruelty of the class of which he is a member—than he is called to attend his father, and suddenly he finds himself in the middle of intrigues and machinations on the highest levels.

Unexpectedly, Carnelian finds his way into a dark, underworld section of the palaces, where he begins to gain an awareness of the secrets of the priestly caste. There he meets Osidian, a young man who takes him on a journey across uncharted paths into a paradisiacal world unlike anything he has experienced before. The two become lovers; but the return to the harsh world of duty and ceremony cannot be postponed, and Carnelian finds himself even more oppressed by the restrictions and obligations of his station. At this point, Pinto throws in one more, even more frustrating complication, and at that point the first volume of this fantasy comes to an end.

Pinto has crafted a surprisingly vivid imaginative world, one full of sharp edges and oppressive dangers. The level of violence here may be higher than some readers are comfortable with, but on the whole this is a very promising debut. Likely to appeal strongly to the same audience that has put Robert Jordan and Terry Goodkind on the genre bestseller lists.

HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE
by J.K. Rowling
Arthur Levine Books (Scholastic), $17.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-590-35340-3

HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS
by J.K. Rowling
Arthur Levine Books (Scholastic), $17.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-439-06486-4

HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN
by J.K. Rowling
Arthur Levine Books (Scholastic), $19.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-439-13635-0

All right, a lot of you have probably blown through these three as enthusiastically as I did, and are awaiting the next in the series as anxiously as I am. Rowling isn't just another fantasy writer, she's a phenomenon, and every writer short of the Stephen King level is probably trying to figure out how to get a

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fraction of the audience she's tapped into.

The basic ingredients are pretty obvious: a coming-of-age story with a misunderstood hero (remember *Slan?*); a nifty wish-fulfillment setting; a sense of humor that will appeal to her core audience; and a good guys/bad guys story with just enough twists to keep the suspense simmering. All those are (or ought to be) the common currency of just about any story-teller. So what accounts for the enormous success of the series?

It seems to me that part of the Harry Potter phenomenon is probably just the usual working of the popular consciousness, which (to judge from experience) can fit a maximum of about three items (Asimov/Clarke/Heinlein, to pick the obvious SF example) into any given pigeonhole, and is usually happiest when it only has to remember one of them. While there are plenty of good writers for young readers, many of them working within the broad area of fantasy, it's easier to go into a bookstore at Christmas with only one thing to keep track of than with a couple of dozen. (This also explains a lot about Stephen King and John Grisham, in case you were wondering.) Rowling has managed to climb into that particular pigeonhole, and as long as she can keep the Harry Potter books fresh, she's got a good chance of keeping it.

But there's more to it than that, of course. The books work on multiple levels: not just as fantasy but as high school hero books, as broad satire, and as mysteries. The booger jokes and the deflation of adult pretensions (almost all the adults in the series are comic figures) are undoubtedly as much of the books' appeal as Harry's success at quidditch, the flying-broomstick game that's all the rage at Hogwarts. Harry's magical powers (first manifested in his survival of the sorcerous attack that killed his parents) are balanced by the fact that he is, at bottom, an ordinary kid trying to make it through school without drawing the attention of hostile teachers and bullies.

Still more to the point, the Harry Potter books are *good* at all the things Rowling is attempting. Not necessarily the best at any one of them, but good enough at all of them that the overall effect is to put the books at the top of the heap. They're funny, suspenseful, and they are full of exactly the sense of wonder that has been the central appeal of SF and fantasy through the ages. And while not all those kids eagerly crowding the big chain bookstores to take part in programs built around her books are going to turn into SF/fantasy readers, a fair number of them are.

The fourth in the series is expected in July, which means that a lot of you will have read it by the time this column appears. Writing from the middle of March, I can only envy you. But don't waste too much pity on me; by the time you read these words, I can guarantee you I'll have hunted down my very own copy. I expect to enjoy every page of it.

THE SFWA GRAND MASTERS, Vol. One
Ed. Frederik Pohl
Tor, $24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-312-86881-2

THE SFWA GRAND MASTERS, Vol. Two
Ed. Frederik Pohl
Tor, $25.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-312-86879-0

Any anthology built around stories from Robert A. Heinlein, Jack Williamson, Clifford Simak, Fritz Leiber, L. Sprague de Camp, Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, Andre Norton, Alfred Bester and Ray Brad-

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bury would be a pretty good bet for enjoyable reading. That makes these books—with a handful of prime stories from each of them—as close to a sure thing as you're going to find.

There's really only one reason for someone who enjoys short SF to pass on these volumes, and that would be already having all the stories in books by the individual Grand Masters. Even that is a bit unlikely, since Pohl has made an effort to avoid the "greatest hits" syndrome to which such anthologies are prone. Heinlein, Asimov, Clarke, and Bradbury are perhaps the most widely read SF writers, but Pohl has managed to avoid the temptation to reprint some of the most obvious choices—"Nightfall," "The Nine Billion Names of God," "The Pedestrian"—in favor of equally powerful but less familiar items by their authors. He has a somewhat freer hand choosing selections by the other giants here—for all their pre-eminence within their chosen field, their work has for the most part never reached a more general audience. In the case of Norton, who has always been best known for novels, her work in shorter forms is likely to be unfamiliar even to her fans.

But don't be fooled. This is by no means a leftovers collection. Heinlein's "The Roads Must Roll" and "Year of the Jackpot," Williamson's "With Folded Hands," de Camp's "A Gun for Dinosaur," Clarke's "The Star" and "A Meeting with Medusa," Asimov's "The Last Question," "Strikebreaker," and "The Martian Way," Bradbury's "The Million-Year Picnic," "All Summer in a Day," and "There Will Come Soft Rains," and Bester's "Fondly Fahrenheit" and "Hobson's Choice" are as good as it gets: top writers at the peak of their form. No surprise; these writers came into SF at a time when short fiction ruled the roost, and (except for Norton) they all made their living in the magazines long before it was possible to sustain a career as a novelist.

Fans of these authors will inevitably think of stories they feel should have been included; I've always had a fondness for Clarke's "History Lesson," for example, and Bester's "The Men who Murdered Mohammed," and it must have been hard for Pohl to justify the omission of Leiber's brilliant "Coming Attraction." But almost anything short of the complete works will leave out *something* good and representative. Suffice it to say that Pohl has done a good job of presenting these authors in a variety of modes. His brief introductory essays are a bonus, adding glimpses of the human beings behind the stories—often with personal anecdotes drawn from his own meetings and friendships with them.

Anyone looking for a present for a young reader who's expressed an interest in SF would be well advised to put these two volumes at the head of the list. Along with SFWA's three "Hall of Fame" volumes, they belong in every public library that makes more than a perfunctory attempt to make science fiction part of its holdings. Quite simply, these two books represent our genre at its very best. O

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

There's still time to come to the Chicago WorldCon; you can join at the door. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs and on how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

AUGUST 2000

10-13--**Mars Society Convention.** For info, write: **Box 273, Indian Hills CO 80454.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). **(E-mail) mzubrin@aol.com.** (Web) **marssociety.com.** Con will be held in: Toronto ON (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Ryerson Polytech U. Guests will include: T. B. A. Promoting Mars exploration.

10-13--**GenCon. (425) 204-2687.** (Web) **wizards.com.** Midwest Express Center, Milwaukee WI. Big gaming meet.

11-13--**ConVersion. (E-mail) whiteri@home.com. (E-mail) con-version.ab.ca.** Metropolitan Centre, Calgary AB. Resnick.

11-14—**FurryCon South. (E-mail) furrycon@sfcp.co.uk.** (Web) **sfcp.co.uk/furrycon.** Stakis Bedford Hotel, Brighton UK.

12-13—**Creation Horror Show. (818) 409-0960.** (Web) **creationent.com.** Pasadena Center, Pasadena CA. Commercial.

13—**Sci Fi Show. (0208) 523-1074. (E-mail) info@scifishows.com.** Nethermayne Sports Center, Basildon UK.

18-20—**ArmadilloCon.** (Web) **sff.net/armadillocon22.** Austin TX. Asaro, B. Mitchell, A. Lebowitz, R. Taylor, M. Russell.

18-20—**VikingCon. (360) 319-8833. (E-mail) vikingcon@sfnorthwest.org.** Western WA U., Bellingham WA. Dyson, Niven.

18-20—**ConSpec. (780) 448-1858. (E-mail) conspec@canada.com.** Best Western Cedar Park, So. Edmonton AB. Literary.

18-20—**UniCon. unicon2000@smof.com.** (Web) **smof.com/unicon2000.** Exeter College, Oxford UK. Philip Pullman.

18-21—**MythCon. (408) 924-2738.** Kilauea Military Camp, Island of Hawaii HI. Theme: "Myth & Legend of the Pacific".

19-20—**Battlestar Galactica Con. (E-mail) mtc007@yahoo.com.** Gateway Theatre, Chicago IL. D. Benedict, T. Carter.

20—**Creation Star Trek Show. (818) 409-0960.** (Web) **creationent.com.** Convention Center, Minneapolis MN.

25-27—**BuboniCon, Box 37257, Albuquerque NM 87176. (505) 266-8905. cwcraig@nmia.com.** Howard Johnson East.

25-27—**MosCon, Box 9622, Moscow ID 83843. (E-mail) bauerhj@moscow.com.** University Inn. F. M. Robinson, D. Barr.

25-27—**StarCon, Box 24955, Denver CO 80224. (303) 757-5850. (E-mail) starland@starland.com.** Commercial Trek.

25-28—**UK Star Trek Con, Box 3150, Wokingham RJ41 4JD, UK. fiveoh@lustchip.com.** Picadilly, Manchester UK.

26-27—**Trek Celebration, 11916 W. 109th #125, Overland Pk. KS 66210. (913) 327-8735.** Philadelphia PA. Commercial.

31-Sep. 4—**ChiCon 2000, Box 642057, Chicago IL 60664. chi2000@chicon.org.** Hyatt. WorldCon. Join at the con.

SEPTEMBER 2000

1-3—**Space:1999 Con, 473 Monmouth #6, Jersey City NJ 07302. t.lowery3@gte.net.** Crowne Plaza, New York NY.

1-3—**Anime Iowa, Box 5303, Coralville IA 52241. (E-mail) info@animeiowa.com.** (Web) **animeiowa.com.** Crowne Plaza.

1-3—**Animefest, Box 292094, Lewisville TX 75029. (301) 253-2366.** (Web) **animefest.com/AnimeFEST.** Dallas TX.

1-4—**Mephit Furmeet, Box 444, Urban, IL 61803.** (Web) **mephitfurmeet.org** Holiday Inn East, Memphis TN.Furries.

2-3—**Vulkon, Box 297122, Pemproke Pines FL 33029. (954) 441-8735. joemotes@aol.com.** Atlanta GA, Trek.

2-3—**Creation Hercules and Xena Show, 100 W. B'way #1200, Glendale CA 91210. (818) 409-0960. creationent.com.**

8-10—**CopperCon, Box 62613, Phoenix AZ 85082. (602) 973-2341.** Holiday Inn Sunspree, Scottsdale AZ. Farmer, DiFate.

AUGUST 2001

30-Sep. 3—**Millennium PhilCon, Box 310, Huntingdon Valley PA 19006.** Philadelphia PA. Bear, Dozois. WorldCon. $145.

AUGUST 2002

29-Sep. 2—**ConJose, Box 61363, Sunnyvale CA 94088. (E-mail) conjose@sfsfc.org.** San Jose CA. V. Vinge. WorldCon

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NEXT ISSUE

OCTOBER / NOVEMBER DOUBLE ISSUE!

Next issue is our immense October/November Special Double Issue, jammed with as much material as we can possibly get into it, including three big novellas, a flock of novelettes and short stories, three exciting feature columns, poems, and cartoons. This is one of the best reading bargains you'll find anywhere in the SF genre: considerably more fiction for a lower cover price than the average paperback, and a much greater variety of work. Stories from this issue show up regularly on the Hugo and Nebula Award ballots. This is an issue you can't afford to miss if you want to stay current with what's happening on the Cutting Edge of SF!

COVER STORY

Our cover story this year is "Fly-By-Night," a brand-new Kzin novella by multiple Hugo and Nebula winner **Larry Niven**. Niven's Kzinti are perhaps the most famous warrior race in the history of SF, fierce, savage, and implacably predatory, the most dangerous enemy that humanity has ever faced. Imagine the consternation, then, when an interstellar passenger ship is stopped in deep space by a Kzinti warship with some non-negotiable demands, and imagine the complications and consequences that follow, especially as nobody aboard really understand what the Kzinti want . . . Imagine all you want, but we're willing to bet that you *can't* imagine all the twists and surprises that Niven has in store for you in this colorful, inventive, and immensely exciting tale of interstellar adventure and deadly piracy in deep space. Don't miss it!

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Walter Jon Williams, **Daniel Abraham**, **Michaela Roessner**, and **Sage Walker** join their considerable talents to bring us a huge (almost novel-length) novella that will take you to a vivid and violent world where dedicated martial artists put their lives on the line every day before cheering crowds of millions, for a tale of obsessive love, betrayal, conspiracy, and revenge called "Tauromaquia"; popular and prolific British "hard science" writer **Stephen Baxter** returns with a harrowing look at the proposition that a soldier's first duty is to *survive*, especially when you're trapped behind enemy lines "On the Orion Line," and those "enemy lines" are in the depths of interstellar space, and you have no ship, no shelter, and only a quickly dwindling supply of air . . . ; new writer **Liz Williams**, making an impressive *Asimov's* debut, takes us to a strange and dangerous alien planet to listen to a seductive "Ancestor's Song"; **Steven Utley** transports us back to the Silurian Age, millions of years before the dinosaurs, for a moving look at the eternal truths to be found in the "Chain of Life"; acclaimed author **Eleanor Arnason**, who showed up on both the final Hugo and Nebula ballots this year, returns with a sequel to her popular story "Stellar Harvest," a fast-paced and evocative adventure that takes interstellar location-scout Lydia Duluth deep into a dangerous web of intrigue, as she struggles to uncover the truth behind the legend of "The Cloud Man"; veteran author **Tom Purdom** paints a compelling portrait of the psychology, both on and off-duty, of the soldiers who put their lives on the line in the airless void of space, in a powerful study of "Sergeant Mother Glory"; playwright and novelist **Jim Grimsley**, winner of the American Library Association **GLBT** Award for Literature and the Sue Kaufman Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, makes a rather silly *Asimov's* debut, with a sharp, sly, and funny advance look at "Peggy's Plan" for the future of Earth.

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" discusses a "Guest of Honor"; **Norman Spinrad's** "On Books" looks at artists who are "Working the Fringes"; and **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" column finds us some "Kid Stuff" (greasy or otherwise!) to play with while we're online; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our huge October/November Special Double Issue on sale on your newsstand on September 12, 2000, or subscribe today (you can also subscribe online, at our *Asimov's* Internet website, at *http://www.asimovs.com*).

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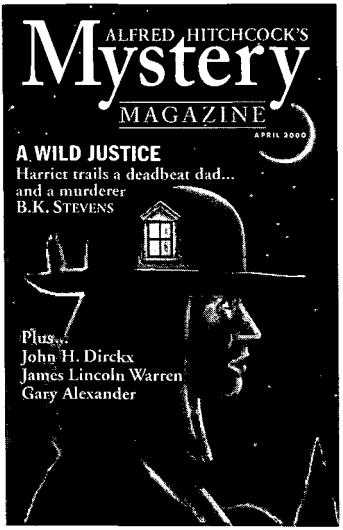

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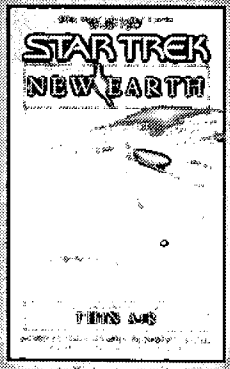

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